Nighttime was the worst part of Harry’s summer. He’d fall asleep, prepared for nightmares. He’d find his nightmares, and when he was startled awake, he’d lie in bed, thinking his mother or father were downstairs, probably having similar nightmares. There was nothing about sleep anymore that held comfort for him.

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How different would the world of Harry Potter be if James and Lily had lived?

Ships not listed because I am unsure if they will deviate from canon. Character tags added as they appear.
Happy Christmas! I've missed you all so much, and I've missed this story so much. Fun fact: I wrote this chapter way back in June! It got some tweaking done these last few weeks, of course, but I’ve been so ready to write this book for so long. I can't wait to share everything with you. I hope you're having a lovely holiday season.

Special thanks to my beta, ageofzero, for all their hard work, and my best friend and consultant, duneekah, for all her endless patience.

The hottest day of the summer was drawing to a close, and a drowsy silence lay over the extensive property of Styncon Garden. The land, and the house in the middle, had been in the Potter family for many generations, and was filled with unusual sorts of plants. Some were unusual in that they weren’t native to the English Cotswolds. They normally grew in more tropical locations, like Southeast Asia, or the center of Africa. There were orange trees and coffee plants; there were all sorts of plants to be used in teas, or vegetables with names so long that even the Swedish would have trouble pronouncing them. There were also plants that were unusual not just because of the environment, but because they were magical. Vines that reached out at you as you walked by, or snapdragons that actually snapped--and the red ones could breathe fire. But even these hung limp in the horrid heat, drooping with the slowly fading summer sun.

Harry was feeling just as drowsy, though unsure he wanted to go to sleep. He leaned against the open bedroom window, in hopes of a faint cool breeze to abate the day’s mugginess, but it was a vain hope. He ran his hand through his sticky black hair and flinched when his palm brushed his forehead, specifically the lightning-bolt shaped scar that cut across it. It hurt worse and worse these days.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes because those ached, too, in protest of his lack of sleep. It wasn’t really his fault he couldn’t sleep at night anymore. His nightmares were outside of his control.

With a groan, Harry flopped onto his bed. Hedwig twittered and ruffled her feathers at the sudden noise, startled awake. Her bright yellow eyes squinted out into the purple horizon. She glanced balefully at Harry for waking her early, but when she saw he wasn’t paying attention, gave up and flew out the window for her evening hunt.

There was a knock on Harry’s door. He replaced his glasses and sat up.

“Come in.”

Lily pushed the door open. She was carrying a steaming mug which she set on Harry’s bedside table. When she paused there, next to his bed, Harry moved over so she could sit down.

“It’s not Sleeping Draught, is it?” Harry asked, looking at the mug like it might bite him. They’d used Sleeping Draught to get him through the first few nights of the summer, but the longer he used it, the worse his headaches became, like his scar was wreaking vengeance upon him for trying
to hide from his nightmares.

“Just chamomile,” Lily said. “Picksie brewed it from the batch your father picked last week.” Her voice was quiet, a little sad and a little distant. Harry knew it wasn’t just about the inevitable nightmares they were both thinking about. She missed James. They hadn’t seen him since Harry’s birthday, two days ago.

This summer had been a strangely quiet affair. James and Lily came and went constantly, and though they tried to make sure at least one of them was home, there were rare occasions Harry was left alone. Well, not entirely alone.

James had brought the house-elves Picksie and Mellie back to Styncon Garden. As if he had known how often he and Lily would be away, that someone would need to look after Harry, and how much care the house would need in their absence, he had asked the two house-elves, at the end of June, to return the the house they’d been initially bound to serve. Picksie had proven utterly indispensible these last few weeks. She kept the house cleaner than Harry had ever seen it, and meals were as good as a Hogwarts feast, with all the fruits, vegetables, and greens fresh-picked from their property. Mellie, too, despite her age, served tea twice a day, in the morning and the afternoon. She’d gained new vigor after returning to the Potter’s house, and insisted the house run as it had when she had worked for Harry’s grandparents. It seemed silly to Harry, and to Lily, to have a formal afternoon tea, particularly when only Harry was home, but James insisted they indulge Mellie.

It was nice to see the house alive and cared for, even if its residents were always coming and going. Harry had always thought it rather empty between him, his parents, and Remus and Sirius’s occasional visits, which were now more infrequent than ever. Harry had seen Sirius four times this summer, each after a fight with Regulus. He’d seen Remus only once, at his birthday.

“Where’s Dad tonight?” Harry asked.

“Your father and Remus are watching someone do something or other,” she sighed. “You know everything is need-to-know.”

“And I don’t need to know.” Harry wished he didn’t sound so bitter, but he did. His parents had promised no more secrets from him, and time and time again they had broken that promise. These days, everything was secret, and even his parents couldn’t tell him what they didn’t know. They still promised that they told him everything they could, but he wasn’t sure that was true anymore, if it ever had been.

Lily looked away from Harry and out the window. Stars were visible on the horizon, now. Her green eyes looked not just distant, but pained. As often as Lily did keep secrets from Harry, it was becoming increasingly difficult for either of them to hide their feelings from each other. They had the same eyes, and it made it easy to read each other’s expressions, just as Harry had gotten so good at reading his father’s body language.

His parents were keeping something important from him, ever since that night in the graveyard, and he hadn’t been able to get an answer, not even out of Remus nor Sirius.

“Where is Sirius?” Harry asked.

“With Regulus. Though if they have another fight, I’m sure he’ll come storming over here and collapse on the couch.”

“They’ve been worse lately, haven’t they?”
“Yes, well, Regulus is kept in the dark about a lot of things. I think it hurts him a little differently than it hurts you.” Lily bit down on her lip and tucked her loose red hair behind her ear.

“If they don’t trust him,” Harry said, knowing that was the reason everyone kept secrets from Regulus, “why do they let him stay at that house?”

“Where else is he supposed to go?” Lily took the mug of tea and put it in Harry’s hands. “He knows things about Voldemort that we need to know, and he knows too much about us to turn him away. Besides, I think, despite how much he and Sirius fight, he’d rather stay and try to be useful.”

“So you trust him?” Harry reluctantly sipped the tea.

“After what he did that night…. I see why Sirius and Dumbledore are upset, but he may have saved your life, and I can’t be angry with him for that.”

Harry remembered Regulus and the flash of green light, then he screwed his eyes closed and took a large sip of his tea. He didn’t want to remember the graveyard. He didn’t want to go back there.

Harry set the half-empty mug of tea down on the knitted coaster on his bedside table. “When will Dad come home?”

“Probably tomorrow night. I hope tomorrow night. I don’t want him and Remus walking home in the morning after staying up all night. They’re supposed to stay with Sirius and sleep before coming home.”

“And they can’t Floo home?”

“Floos are too easily watched.” Lily kissed Harry’s forehead, just to the side of his scar. “Try to get some sleep. I’m going into the Muggle village tomorrow to send a letter to your Aunt Petunia. Would you like to come with? Get out of this house? We can get ice cream.”

It wasn’t much of a consolation, but at least it was something to look forward to. “Sure. Okay.”

She smiled, but her eyes were still sad. They were always sad these days, even when his father was home.

“Goodnight, dear,” she whispered, and turned out the gas lamps with a tap of her wand.

“Goodnight, Mum.”

Like he had so many nights before, Harry returned to the graveyard in his dreams. It wasn’t like he simply relived the events of that night four weeks ago, but rather he experienced in heightened detail the worst parts of his memories. And that wasn’t just suffering the Cruciate Curse himself.

It was listening to Cedric suffer the curse.

It was the being stuck in the moment that Voldemort had tried to impel him to murder Cedric, and there was a part of Harry that knew he could have done it, that wanted to do it, that nearly did do it.

It was listening to Regulus’s screams as he suffered the Cruciate Curse.

It was watching Regulus murder Barty Crouch, Jr. over and over again.

Harry woke up, hoping he hadn’t screamed and woken up his mother. He was breathing hard. His sheets felt too warm, and he kicked them off in desperation. Harry sat up and ran his hands through his hair. It stood on end, sticky with sweat. He reached for a cold glass of water, only to find the
half-full cup of chamomile, now room temperature.

And like so many nights before, there were footsteps in the hallway. Harry quickly laid down and pretended to be asleep. He’d only just closed his eyes again when he heard the door creak open.

The first week without Sleeping Draught had been terrible for all of them. James and Lily had come running upstairs and held Harry until he fell asleep again, or until he finally told them to go back to bed. But Harry quickly began to realize there were some things his parents just couldn’t fix, and James and Lily had to understand that they could no longer protect Harry from everything.

Harry had heard James say to Remus after that first week, “I just feel so helpless. It’s like… like the first time I knew what you were going through each month, and knowing I couldn’t do anything.”

“You’ve done a fair bit for me, I would say.”

“But what do I do now, for Harry?”

Remus hadn’t had an answer.

After that, Harry had tried to keep his nightmares quiet. It was hard enough just knowing his parents couldn’t help him. He didn’t need to know they felt guilty on top of it.

But some nights, they still heard him, especially on a night like tonight, when Lily slept lightly, kept awake by the warm night and worry over an absent husband.

Harry knew his tangled sheets and unsteady breathing were dead giveaways of his nightmare, but he thought maybe, just maybe, she might think he was alright. Unfortunately, lying had never been one of Harry’s strengths.

Lily picked her way around discarded robes and abandoned, half-finished homework and took a seat on the edge of Harry’s bed. She ran a hand along his back, a gentle, comforting touch. It made Harry feel six again and safe again, and his breathing steadied.

“I have them too, you know,” she said softly. “Our first year back in this house, after the end of the war, I would wake up in the middle of the night, thinking Voldemort had come for you again. Your father used to fall asleep by your crib. He’d fall asleep holding his wand. He left a scorch mark in the rug from one of his dreams. I still worry about him, and you of course. Sometimes I have nightmares about losing you or your father, or Remus and Sirius.” Lily paused, and Harry wondered what part of this speech was supposed to be encouraging.

“It’s okay to feel scared,” she said. “We all feel scared sometimes.”

“Were you scared when you fought him?” Harry asked.

“Terrified. Not of him, exactly, but of the idea that he’d hurt you. I was afraid I would lose you.”

“You’re not going to lose me.”

“I know.”

“You’re not going to lose Dad, either.”

“I came up here to comfort you.”

Harry finally rolled over and looked up at his mother. “Then tell me I’m not going to lose you.”
“You’re not going to lose me.” Lily leaned over and kissed Harry’s forehead. She took his hand and squeezed it. “Do you want some Sleeping Draught? You haven’t had it in a while. One night might be alright.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m alright, really, Mum.”

Judging by the sadness in her smile, she didn’t believe him. But she didn’t press. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Harry wondered if it wasn’t already morning, and hoped that by now, his father and Remus were back at Sirius’s, sleeping peacefully, or at least more peacefully than he was sleeping.

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The walk to the village post office was long, but beautiful. Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever walked this path before. If he went into town with his parents, they usually Apparated. With the relatively recent addition of Anti-Apparition Charms around their property, however, Lily and Harry had to walk. Harry expected to Side-Along with Lily when they reached their property line, but they crossed the marker—a meter-high, crumbling stone wall—and she did not hold out her hand to him. Instead, she turned to walk up the hill.

“Why aren’t we Apparating?” Harry asked, jogging to catch up with her again.

“Oh, it’s not safe,” she said.

Harry did not understand. His mother had Side-Along Apparated with him dozens of times. Why was she suddenly worried she’d splinch them now? Perhaps she hadn’t slept well-enough to Apparate.

Even though they’d waited until late afternoon, hoping to avoid the worst of the day’s heat, by the time they reached the small town of Stinchcombe, Harry felt drenched in sweat. He was really looking forward to the ice cream his mother had promised him.

They walked into the town, and Harry could tell immediately how different it was from London. He didn’t have a lot of experience with Muggle towns apart from London, but this one reminded him a bit of Hogsmeade, with its small houses and shops, and stone-paved streets and bridges. Lily led him through the streets, which were not very crowded on a warm summer evening, to the post office, which was also empty so late in the day.

The Muggle behind the counter smiled at Lily. “’Ow are you this evening, Miss Potter?”

“Just wonderful, thank you,” she smiled, and walked to a wall of small boxes with little locks on them.

Harry smiled at the Muggle, a little uncomfortable. He didn’t have much experience interacting with Muggles. There was the occasional shopkeeper in London, and of course the cousin he’d met once, but otherwise Muggles were a strange entity to him.

The man smiled with a wide, overly-friendly grin. “Ah, and yeh must be Harry? I saw yeh when yeh were a small thing.” He leaned down to put his hand at about his knee. “Clinkin’ to yer Mum’s skirts. She says nothin’ but praise about yeh. Yer what now, eighteen?”

“Fifteen,” Harry said. It was odd to think that this Muggle knew him. Not odd in the way wizards knew him, because they knew him by the scar on his forehead, but this Muggle knew him because his mother talked about him. He hoped she’d only said good things.
“Ah, tall for such a young’un. Taller’n yer mum now, are yah?”

Lily returned to Harry’s side with a letter in hand. “Very nearly,” she said, and tried to flatten some of Harry’s more stubborn hairs.

Harry had noticed that at some point between the start and end of the Triwizard Tournament, he’d reached his mother’s height. When they stood side-by-side, his messy hair made him look an inch taller.

“Always good to see yeh, Miss,” the postman said with a wave. “Have a good’un.”

Lily thanked him, and they left.

From where they stood, at the top of one of the taller hills in the city, they could see a large swath of the Cotswolds beneath them, wide expanses of green, dotted with darker trees and scattered houses and shops. Churches were marked with tall steeples, like spires rising from the ground. It really was a wonderful view up here, but Harry didn’t feel like he could appreciate it, not truly. There were all these Muggles below them, and not one had an inkling of Voldemort’s existence or the danger they were in.

“Mum, why hasn’t the *Prophet* reported any attacks on Muggles?”

Lily took his hand and squeezed it. “That is not a conversation for open air. Come on, let’s get that ice cream I promised you.”

They bought ice cream at a shop a few doors down. A few of the townspeople seemed to know Lily, and a couple of elderly ladies made adoring sighs when they saw Harry walking with Lily. He felt oddly self-conscious, but it was a strange relief to feel self-conscious for something other than his scar.

They sat down on the curb to enjoy their ice cream scoops and to rest before the long walk home.

“Did you take me down here a lot when I was smaller?” Harry asked as an elderly woman walked by with a middle-aged woman pushing a pram. The elderly woman smiled at him and Lily like she knew something about them, but Harry couldn’t imagine what she was thinking.

“A fair bit after the war.” Lily smiled back at the elderly woman as they passed. “Your father and I didn’t like to be apart much, and Remus and Sirius were busy helping the Ministry put things back together. That meant we didn’t get a sitter for you too often. Wasn’t until you were nearly five that we started leaving you at home more.”

“It’s nice here,” he said, looking up at the pale orange sky. “Quieter than London.”

“Most Muggle villages aren’t like London,” Lily laughed.

When their ice cream was finished, they began the long trek home. Harry asked again why Lily wouldn’t Apparate.

“There are Muggles nearby.”

But there really weren’t. Not near enough that it mattered. They’d Apparated in and out of London before, hadn’t they? Harry didn’t know why his mother was making excuses, but it was no good arguing with her. Arguing with Lily was like arguing with a hippogriff, and though many were stupid enough to argue with her, few were brave enough to. James, Remus, and Sirius could stand and fight her, of course, but only because they were all equally as stubborn. Harry was still learning
how to be as stubborn as his parents without being disrespectful.

They started the walk from the town back through the Cotswolds, and half a kilometer out, ran across a pair of Muggle hikers.

“Lovely evening for a hike,” Lily said, as their paths merged into one.

“‘Tis,” the man wheezed. He wasn’t particularly old, not much older than Mr. Weasley, Harry thought, but he looked terribly worn out. “She had the bright idea to walk all the way from Nymphsfield.”

The woman hiker looked tired, but her eyes sparkled in a way that reminded Harry of his father, with a love of adventure and activity. “Ah, he’s just complaining because he wanted to stay for another round of golf. I told him there’s golfing here in Stinchcombe, but he’s a whiner.”

The man wheezed in irritation.

“It’s our twenty-fifth anniversary trip, and he wants to waste it golfing,” the woman said. “What about you two? Newly-wed trip along Cotswold Way?”

Harry just about choked, and Lily laughed.

“No, no, this is my son. We live just on the other side of the hill. Spent the evening together in town.”

“Ah, what a good lad you are,” the woman said. “No motor, then?”

“It’s a nice walk,” Lily said.

Harry agreed it was a nice walk, but he wouldn’t have complained about taking Sirius’s motorbike into town instead, or maybe Mr. Weasley’s flying car.

Lily and the woman carried on a polite conversation about the weather and the gardens in Stinchcombe while they walked. The woman’s husband seemed more focused on putting one foot in front of the other. When he did open his mouth, it was to grumpily correct his wife or to complain about his aching knees and back.

The Muggle couple was walking up to the bed and breakfast at the top of the hill, which was largely on Lily and Harry’s way home, so the four of them were stuck together. The evening grew dark as they walked, and the Muggle couple each pulled a torch out of their pockets. Harry wished he could use a Wand-Lighting Charm—it would be brighter—but they certainly couldn’t in front of Muggles.

“Oh, let me,” Lily said, as the man adjusted the camping pack on his back, struggling to hold the torch and his pipe. He handed her the torch without complaint and Lily held it out on the path in front of them.

The Muggle woman asked Harry if he was in school, what classes he liked, and if he played any sports. Harry had no idea how to answer, so he just told her he liked all his classes and played no sports, both of which were terrible lies. He didn’t know much about Muggle society, but he did ask her what she did for a living, and if she had any children.

She told him she wrote about scientific research in the Muggle world, and talked at length about space. Harry tried to keep up with his knowledge from his Astronomy classes, but she talked about a lot of things he’d never heard of. He mentioned some things he did know, and pointed at a few of
the stars he could remember the names of. She was impressed.

“Don’t know many boys who can read stars,” she said. “It’s impressive. You ever thought of a career in stars? Science is growing a fair bit out there. Lots of opportunities for young lads in space.”

Harry told her honestly that he had not, then was about to ask what sorts of things were required for that kind of work, more out of politeness than earnest curiosity, but he saw the star he had just named for her disappear. One by one, the stars began to wink out.

Harry blinked in surprise. He didn’t realize what was happening until the temperature dropped sharply. His breath was visible for a moment as vapor, and then the torches went dark, too.

“Mum!” Harry said, reaching his hand out for where he thought she was, but his fingers found nothing. With his other hand, he reached into his pocket for his wand, knowing full-well he shouldn’t perform magic in front of Muggles, but also knowing there must be a dementor nearby, and he wasn’t about to let it hurt these innocent people. But his mother should have her wand out by now, surely. Surely her patronus would appear any minute.

There was a thud as something heavy hit the ground, and Harry could stand the darkness no longer. “Lumos!” he said, and in the bright white light that surrounded them, Harry caught a glimpse of the Muggle woman, standing next to him with a hand over her mouth and tears running down her cheeks.

She blinked at the brightness and stared at Harry, confusion creeping into her sorrow.

Harry didn’t see Lily, and when he turned, he saw a hooded black figure approaching him.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry said.

A silver wisp of light shot from his wand. The dementor hesitated, but only for a moment. It came towards Harry at a steady pace, breath rattling and bony hands reaching for Harry. The hands looked covered in slime, and the skin, if it was skin, was peeling off in places, dark like a fresh scab.

Harry searched desperately for a happy memory, but his happy memories were being rapidly sucked out by this creature. Its hands reminded Harry of Voldemort’s grotesque, misshapen body that had been dropped into the cauldron during his resurrection. The Muggle woman next to him began to scream, and it reminded him of his mother’s scream, on the night Voldemort had attacked his family. Harry felt cold, alone, and he couldn’t find any hope.

Desperately, Harry reconstructed his most recent happy memories--ice cream with his mother, and a midnight birthday broom flight with his father--and tried again. “Expecto Patronum!”

Just as the dementor’s bony fingers brushed Harry’s neck, a burst of silver shot from Harry’s wand again, knocking the dementor back. Harry felt a flutter in his chest, and a boost of confidence. He tried again.

“Expecto Patronum!”

This time, an enormous, silver stag burst from Harry’s wand. Its antlers caught the dementor in the chest, and carried it away at a gallop.

Harry raised his wand-light higher, scanning the grassy path for his mother and the Muggle man. He finally found them just on the edge of his light. He ran forward, and his wand-light fell on a
second dementor, hovering over them.

The old man had collapsed on the ground and was groaning, either in physical or emotional pain. Lily was on her knees, torch still in her hands, but no sign of her wand. The dementor’s skeleton-like fingers touched her cheeks; its hood was lowered, revealing a slimy skeleton-like head. Lily’s green eyes looked blank, and Harry thought with a panic the dementor had already sucked out her soul.

He pointed his wand at the hooded figure with a shout, and the stag ran past him at full gallop. It collided with the dementor and tossed it into the air. The dementors were gone, the Patronus dissolved, and the stars and torches burst back to life.

The man’s groaning quieted, but Lily did not stir.

“Mum!” Harry said, and grabbed her shoulders. Her usually brilliant green eyes were dull, unfocused, and dazed. She stared at something far beyond Harry, lips parted, quivering. Harry could not tell if their trembling was reminiscent of words or if it was simply out of fear. He looked down and saw one of her hands still gripped the torch. Her other was open. Inches from her fingertips lay her wand.

Had she been caught off guard? Why hadn’t she cast her patronus first?

Though she did not seem to recognize him, Harry put her wand in her hand and pulled her to her feet. Now he noticed the Muggle couple was staring at him, dazed and shocked.

“Er--the bed and breakfast is up that way,” he pointed up the hill. “Get there, and get yourselves warm, okay?”

The man blinked at Harry, then looked at his wife. They said nothing, but hand-in-hand began the hike up the hill.

Harry pulled his mother’s arm around her shoulder, fairly easy to do now that they were the same height, and began helping her towards the house. It wasn’t much farther, but they moved slowly, both from their combined weight and the cold block of ice that had formed inside Harry’s chest when the dementors arrived, and even still refused to melt.
A Peck of Owls

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I’m quite ready to kick 2016 to the curb. This week alone has been emotionally devastating in terms of celebrity deaths, and this year on the whole has been frustratingly awful for so many reasons.

But today was a good day. I wrote today, and that makes me quite pleased. Writing is my sole source of joy these days.

Enjoy this newest chapter. It's short, but packed quite full of nice details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWO
A Peck of Owls

When the house finally came into view, Harry saw two lights on — one in the kitchen, and one in Remus’s room. His heart swelled with hope and he adjusted his grip on Lily. She, too, seemed to find some extra strength at the sight of the house, or at least she didn’t seem to feel as heavy to Harry. They were able to walk more quickly up the path.

As Harry put his foot on the top step of the porch, the door flung open, and James’s ready grin vanished with the color in his face. He suddenly looked as pale as Lily, and took her from Harry. Harry was left to close the door while James helped Lily to a chair in the dining room.

Before James could ask what had happened, or if Harry was alright, Harry said the one thought that had been on his mind for the entire walk.

“Chocolate.”

James paused only to shout upstairs for Remus, then disappeared into the kitchen. The sound of cupboards banging and drawers slamming echoed into the dining room. Then there was the padding of gentle footsteps — a hasty rhythm that missed one beat as Remus knowingly skipped the fourth stair — and Remus appeared in the doorway. He was in the middle of buttoning up his shirt, and his eyes were shadowed with exhaustion.

He took in the sight of Lily and Harry and asked, “What happened? Where’s James?”

The answer to his second question was immediate. James appeared with an armful of Honeyduke’s chocolate bars, a bag of small, bite-sized Muggle chocolates, and at least seven chocolate frogs. Picksie was on his heels with another handful of chocolates.

The small house-elf let out a soft “Oh!” when she saw Lily. She slipped between James and Lily, felt Lily’s cold hands, then disappeared into the kitchen. She came back with warm towels for both Harry and Lily. It wasn’t quite as good as chocolate, but it was certainly comforting.

Before Harry could find the words to answer Remus’s second question, and explain what had happened to them, a screech owl came in through the kitchen and dropped a letter onto the table near Harry’s chair.
James was too busy making sure Lily was eating chocolate and rubbing warmth back into her hands to see it, but Remus noticed and raised his eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic seal.

Harry was sure it couldn’t have good news, though a tiny part of him dared to hope it was an apology for the dementor attack. But as he slid the letter out of the envelope and saw the signature at the bottom, he knew he was in serious trouble. He didn’t realize just how serious until he saw its contents.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of two Muggles.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Wizards’ Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on August 12th.

Hoping you are well,
Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk
Improper Use Of Magic Office
Ministry of Magic

Harry felt all feeling drain from his face. His mouth was suddenly dry and his face numb with shock. He’d gotten a warning when he was twelve for an improper use of magic, because the house-elf Dobby had used a Hover Charm in his presence, at a Muggle residence. But that letter hadn’t told him he was expelled, and it certainly hadn’t said he was going to have his wand broken.

Remus held his hand out for the letter — either he was simply impatient for it, or he saw the panic in Harry’s face — and Harry passed it to him. With the new information about a Patronus charm, Remus was finally able to put together Lily’s shock and the chocolate.

“Dementors.”

James shot up out of his chair, and possibly the only thing that kept him rocketing into the ceiling was Lily’s death grip on his hand.

“Dementors? That’s what happened?”

Harry could only nod. Remus passed the letter to James, who scanned it hastily.

“But that’s ridiculous! They can’t expel you — improper use of magic!” The last time Harry had seen his father this angry was a year ago, when Remus had been wrongly arrested. “I’m going down there.” His anger seemed to pause while he gently extricated his hand from Lily’s.

She flexed her fingers at the absence of his hand, which was the most independent movement Harry had seen from her since the dementor attack. The fireplace in the kitchen roared as James left for the Ministry, and Harry moved to sit next to Lily. Instead of letting him sit in the chair beside her, however, she reached out for his arm and pulled him into her lap.
Harry felt a little old to be sitting in his mother’s lap, especially considering they were nearly the same size, but he let her hold him tightly, as if he were eight years old again. She seemed to need it and he, terrified of losing his wand and being expelled, needed it, too. They hadn’t sat like this since he was twelve, and he’d worried he was the Heir of Slytherin. He hadn’t thought there was anything worse than worrying that he was secretly petrifying his fellow students, but the impending loss of his wand was a new contender.

Harry watched Remus reread the letter. Harry didn’t know what Remus was looking for. It had seemed fairly clear: no more Hogwarts, no more wand, no more magic.

A second owl came soaring into the kitchen and dropped a letter in front of Remus. It left without even landing. This new letter wasn’t sealed; it was only a hastily folded scrap of parchment. Remus read it, and passed it to Harry.

Remus — Dumbledore’s just arrived at the Ministry, and he’s trying to sort it all out.

Harry — DO NOT LEAVE THE HOUSE. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND.

—James

Lily read over his shoulder and tightened her arms around Harry. She didn’t say anything, but Harry remembered the way his father had stood up to the Ministry when they’d taken Remus’s wand. He had no doubt his parents would defend him just as fiercely.

“Harry, can you tell me what happened?” Remus asked.

Harry didn’t know how much there really was to explain when it came to a dementor attack. “We were walking back from town with a Muggle couple. Then everything went dark. Two dementors attacked us. They didn’t bother the Muggles, I don’t think. I mean, they affected the Muggles, but they seemed like they were after Mum and me. They… I think it tried to kiss Mum. But I managed a Patronus and they—er, the dementors—went off.”

“Seems fairly cut and dried.” Remus folded the Ministry’s letter up. “You can’t be expelled for magic performed in defense.”

Harry knew that had to be true, but he wondered why Remus still looked worried.

“Are you alright, Mum?” he asked.

“I will be.” She let out a slow breath and took a long moment to gather her words. “I guess I never understood how strong the effects of dementors are. I only saw them at your Quidditch match, and I’d thought my fear was from you falling—I wanted you safe so bad, making a Patronus seemed easy. But tonight… all I could see was—was you and your father—”

“Lily,” Remus gentle voice interrupted, “have another chocolate, and talk about better things.”

Before Harry could think of another way to direct the conversation, a third owl swooped into the
kitchen. It dropped another Ministry of Magic envelope onto the table in front of Harry, then flew out the window.

Harry opened it, thinking the news certainly could not be any worse than it already was.

Dear Mr. Potter,

 Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on 12th August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

 Following discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further inquiries.

 With best wishes,
 Yours sincerely,
 Mafalda Hopkirk

 Improper Use of Magic Office
 Ministry of Magic

Harry passed the letter to Remus.

“That’s one crisis averted, at least,” Remus said. “I think the best thing we could do now would be to get a good night’s rest.”

Harry was about to tell Remus he would not be going to bed until his father was home when the fireplace in the kitchen roared, and James walked into the dining room, dusting soot off the cuffs of his robes. He grabbed a Chocolate Frog from the table and sat down in the chair beside Lily.

“Did the Ministry tell you he’s not expelled?” James said, and took a bite of his frog before it could hop away.

Remus nodded. “Pending a hearing.”

“It’s hippogriff shit.” James finished off his chocolate and threw the wrapper back down on the table.

Harry wondered if Lily said nothing about James’s language because she agreed, or she still wasn’t fully herself yet.

Picksie appeared with a fourth cup of tea for James. He thanked her and continued with his tirade.

“I mean, really,” he said, “if I were in the Ministry, I think firstly I’d be impressed that a student who hasn’t even taken his O.W.L.s yet can conjure a Patronus at all, let alone actually use one to fight off dementors! Half the staff on the Wizengamot can’t even do that.”

Something small clicked in Harry’s brain, something from Hogwarts acceptance letters that he hadn’t really thought much of, but had unwittingly memorized. “The Wizengamot — is that who my trial will be with? Isn’t Dumbledore Chief Warlock or something?”

“Dumbledore was demoted.” James ran a hand over his face. “And anyway, your hearing should be
with Amelia Bones. She’s head of the Improper Use office, and she’s a good family friend. It’ll be alright.”

“Why was Dumbledore demoted?”

James glanced over Harry’s shoulder at Lily. Harry turned around to look at his Mum. Her eyes were no longer vacant. Her old ferocity was returning, and she gave James a very hard stare. The sort of stare she gave him when she knew he was on the cusp of making an inappropriate joke for Sirius’s sake. The sort of stare that demanded James keep his mouth shut.

“We should have this conversation another night,” Remus said. It sounded like he was settling a fight between James and Lily, but Harry couldn’t imagine James and Lily had had a fight over Dumbledore being demoted. He wondered what it was really all about.

As they stood for bed, two more owls flew in the window.

“Aren’t we popular this evening,” James grumbled.

One had a letter for James, the other was for Harry.

James opened his and the corner of his mouth twisted in a half-smile. “Sirius says he’s glad you’re both okay, and congratulates you on fighting off two dementors.”

Harry looked at his letter and its unfamiliar script. He was used to Sirius’s large loopy handwriting and Regulus’s perfect and even lettering. He could recognize Ron’s slanted letters and Hermione’s neat script. This did not belong to any one of those, however, and Harry wasn’t sure who else could be writing to him.

Dear Harry,

I’ve just heard from my father what happened to you. It’s a terrible thing — the dementors are supposed to be under the control of the Ministry, and I’m not sure which is worse: thinking the Ministry sent them, or thinking they went of their own accord. This, more than anything, though, proves someone is out to get you because you’re right. Someone wants to silence you, and we can’t trust even the Ministry.

Be careful and keep your head down. I think I may be seeing you soon.

— Cedric

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Nighttime was the worst part of Harry’s summer. He’d fall asleep, prepared for nightmares. He’d find his nightmares, and when he was startled awake, he’d lie in bed, thinking his mother or father were downstairs, probably having similar nightmares. There was nothing about sleep anymore that held comfort for him.

Days were supposed to be a reprieve from that. In the daytime, he could fly on a broom, take a walk through the garden, wander the house, or even do his homework. Ever since the dementor attack, however, days were no longer enjoyable. His broom reminded him he might never play Quidditch with Gryffindor again. The garden and the house reminded him he might be stuck here forever. His homework reminded him he might never get to go to school again.

The morning after the attack, Harry thought he should write Hermione. She might have something useful to say about the trial, something Remus or James might not even know. He started his letter at breakfast, but when Lily sat down at the table, she let out a soft, “Oh,” and took a deep breath. It was the sort of breath Harry was familiar with, and associated with bad news.

“Harry,” her voice was tentative. Whatever she had to say, Harry wasn’t going to like it. He steeled himself, but also hoped he was about to learn something he’d been asking about all summer.

“I don’t think you should be writing letters right now.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

James came into the dining room, still rubbing sleep out of his eyes. It was unusual that all three of them were home for a meal, but Harry didn’t have the energy to even feel happy about that.

Mellie set a tea tray on the table and returned to the kitchen. Lily took a cup and sipped it slowly.
Harry felt his anxiety and frustration growing with every second she waited.

“We need to be careful right now,” she finally said.

“I’m only telling Hermione what happened. She should know, and she might have some advice.”

“I’m sure Hermione already knows,” James said. He yawned as he buttered his toast, and completely missed the sharp glare Lily shot at him.

Harry might have dismissed James’s comment as a result of tiredness, or perhaps James assumed Ron had already written Hermione. But Lily’s reaction gave away that this was a secret Harry wasn’t supposed to know. “How would Hermione know about the dementors?”

James paused, toast halfway to his mouth. Lily’s lips were pressed together tightly, as she worked to weave an appropriate explanation.

“You promised you’d tell me everything,” Harry reminded them.

Lily’s frustration seemed to evaporate and was replaced with utter exhaustion. She dropped her head into her hand and sighed. “You’re right, Harry. We do owe you an explanation, but not here. Not right now.”

This was not the answer Harry wanted. He crumpled up his half-written letter to Hermione and left it on the table. He started up to his room without even finishing his breakfast.

“Hey,” James called after him. “Don’t waste parchment. And don’t leave your stuff lying around. Picksie has enough to do without picking up your trash.”

“What’s the point of a house-elf, then?” Harry shot back, though he didn’t mean it. He usually did his best to not leave extra work for Picksie, but right now he was frustrated with his parents.

“I’ll make Mellie do it,” James said, “and you won’t hear the end of it for weeks.”

Unlike Picksie, who would gladly clean whatever needed cleaning, Mellie grumbled and complained about her work. She was like the grumpy old grandmother Harry had never wanted. She puttered around the house, criticizing the state of it, criticizing the Potters’ appearances, telling them all they were too skinny, and they cared nothing for the house and its legacy. Once Harry caught her cleaning one of the spare rooms, and being particularly nasty to a portrait of Dorea Potter.

Harry had never met a house-elf like Mellie. She was old and bitter, whereas every house-elf Harry had met at Hogwarts, Picksie included, was overly pleasant and polite. Even Dobby, who loved being free, could be particularly subservient.

Pickie and James excused Mellie’s behavior by saying she’d been encouraged to be rude by Dolly Potter many years ago and had run with it ever since. At Hogwarts, Harry had thought her rudeness quirky, and he liked it. Now that she was at home, and he had to hear it every afternoon, he found it a little less so.

So he cleaned up his parchment, properly disposed of what he’d written on and returned the clean part of it to his trunk. He looked at his unfinished homework and considered finishing it, but it was hard to convince himself to finish his Potions essay when he wasn’t even sure he’d ever sit through another Potions class.

Still, there was nothing left to do. His mother surely wouldn’t let him go outside after what had
happened last night, and he didn’t feel like wandering around the house. Maybe if he got his mother in a better mood, worked on his homework with her, she might be more talkative.

Harry collected his Potions notes from their scattered locations, found his Potions textbook under his bed, kicked there at some point in the last week, and returned downstairs. He paused, however, on the last step. His parents voices were carrying from the dining room in quiet whispers. Harry knew those hushed tones meant they didn’t want to be overheard, but Harry had overheard a lot from those conversations. Sometimes good things, sometimes bad things, but always important things.

He stepped softly and leaned against the door frame.

“You don’t think maybe this is a good thing?” Lily asked.

“What do you mean?”

“We could teach him at home. Surely you, Remus, Sirius, and I are far better teachers than what he could learn at school. He’d be safer —”

“Safer than Hogwarts?”

“How safe is Hogwarts really?” Lily’s voice was sharp, and Harry wasn’t sure if it was with frustration or fear. With his mother, it was often hard to tell the two apart. “Quirrell, the diary, Barty Crouch, and — James, Voldemort literally kidnapped our son from Hogwarts and nearly killed him. I trust Dumbledore, I do, but we can’t pretend Hogwarts is any safer than here or anywhere else.”

Harry felt his heart sink into his stomach. His mother’s words hurt all the more for being true. She wasn’t exaggerating in the least, but Hogwarts was where he wanted to be. He loved his family, but he loved his friends, he loved Quidditch and, for the most part, he loved his classes. What did Lily mean his parents could teach him as well as at school? Certainly Defense and Transfiguration, maybe Potions and Charms, but how much did they know about Herbology or Care of Magical Creatures? Harry still had plenty he wanted to learn when it came to Divination and star charts, too. He didn’t even have his O.W.L.s yet. How could he could he get a job in the wizarding world without his O.W.L.s?

James let out a heavy sigh. “I know you’re right, but…. Let’s decide after the trial. If Harry’s expelled, well, that makes the decision for us. For now, we’ll take him to headquarters and tell him what we can. It’s going to be a pain, but we have to get to London at some point anyway.”

Harry’s heart began to race. What was headquarters? Was it in London, too, then? What were his parents going to tell him? How much, exactly, were they keeping secret from him? He fought the urge to burst into the dining room and ask all his questions now. He hadn’t really overheard any secrets, but it wouldn’t do to let his parents know he’d been eavesdropping.

There was a quiet cough that startled Harry, and he turned around to see Remus standing behind him with his usual polite smile. But Remus said nothing, only winked and walked into the dining room.

Harry heard James and Lily wish Remus good morning, and there was a scraping of chairs against the wood floor. Harry heard the clinking of a tea tray as either Mellie or Picksie brought breakfast for Remus. Harry heard mumbling — “Master James and his friends are always sleeping late, they are.” — and he knew it was Mellie. As much as Mellie grumbled, Harry had to admit he had never once heard her say anything bad about Remus being a werewolf.
Once Mellie’s light footsteps were gone, Harry decided it was safe to enter the dining room without looking suspicious.

James and Lily smiled at him, though their smiles were wary. Harry thought they deserved that. He wanted to demand to know everything, right now, and to tell them he wanted to be at Hogwarts with his friends, but he held his tongue.

“Good morning, Harry,” Remus said, as if they’d only just seen each other.

“Morning,” Harry replied.

“Sleep alright?” Remus asked. It seemed a silly question, since it was hard for anyone who slept in the house to miss Harry’s nightmares.

“Yeah.”

Harry wondered if Remus expected an honest answer. Remus probably didn’t, but judging by the pause Remus left after that answer, Harry guessed that Remus only wanted to provide a space for Harry to talk about his nightmares, if he wanted to. Harry had never tried to talk through his nightmares. It was bad enough to live through them each evening. He didn’t want them spoiling his breakfast, too.

Harry set his Potions book down on the table and began his homework. Lily moved to sit beside him and help, but no one offered to tell him about headquarters. No one offered any secrets or explanations. No one said anything about leaving home for London. Harry wondered when he ought to expect that conversation to take place, but knew he couldn’t ask for it without revealing he’d been listening to them.

For three days, Harry waited for someone to tell him they were leaving. He sensed it, certainly. James had begun cleaning the house alongside Picksie, and covering furniture in some of the bedrooms. Lily had started checking in on his homework every morning, and helping him through as much of it as she could. She seemed eager for him to be finished. Harry started to work with urgency, thinking that maybe they’d leave when his homework was done.

The oddest part of those three days, however, was that neither James nor Lily left the house in all that time. Harry hadn’t seen so much of his parents at one time all summer. Remus, however, had only stayed through supper on the first day.

Despite the unusual atmosphere, built by Remus’s prolonged absence, no letters coming or going, Harry’s anxiety over the possibility of not returning to Hogwarts, and the hushed conversations that stopped abruptly every time Harry walked in on his parents, the punctual breakfast, tea, lunch, dinner, tea, and supper routine had a surprising effect on the Potter family. Harry had never noticed how the urgency of a meal could affect the mood of the household, or how a late dinner could contribute to a grumpy atmosphere until he saw how much better everyone seemed to feel when they could sit down to a meal that was ready on time, and had taken no effort on their part to make. House-elves were truly a wonder, and Harry thought that anyone who didn’t appreciate them didn’t deserve them. He felt a little more comfortable being the official secretary of S.P.E.W.

On the fourth morning, Sirius and Remus arrived in the middle of breakfast.

“You’re here so early,” Lily said. She got up and hugged each of them.

“The walk alright?” James asked, and pulled out chairs.

Picksie came in with breakfast. “Was not expecting you two,” she said with a squeak. “Plenty of
food, plenty of food! Mister Remus, you look very well, today. A bit flushed, but well.”

“Thank you, Picksie.” Remus smiled at her. “We thought we’d beat the afternoon heat.”

“And you did both sleep last night, didn’t you?” asked Lily.

“Don’t worry. We weren’t on duty,” Sirius said as he sat down.

Lily shot Harry a look that said, “Whatever you’re thinking about, don’t do it.”

But Harry, who had been bursting with questions for days, was not going to let this opportunity pass. “On duty for what?”

Sirius looked at Lily and James like a deer caught in a torchlight.

“We’ll tell you everything soon,” James said, “but it’s not something to talk about here.”

“How soon?”

“How does tonight sound?” Remus asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lily chewed on her lower lip, but nodded. “Alright, tonight.” She gulped down the last of her tea. “Harry, make sure you’re packed for school and packed for a week’s stay.”

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.

“We’re going to stay with friends.” Lily said it with such finality, Harry knew he would get no more details out of her.

It took Harry most of the time between breakfast and lunch to pack his room up. He’d gotten lazy over the summer, and though each summer he told himself, “I’ll only take out of my trunk what I need, and put it right back when I’m done with it,” that never happened. Somehow, his school robes had been taken out to wash and never been replaced in his trunk, though that had been weeks ago. His books were scattered around the room. For some reason, Divination was easier to do by a window; Transfiguration was lying open on his desk; Potions and Charms were stacked on his nightstand, where his mother had left them after reviewing his work; History of Magic he had to hunt for, before he found it on top of Monster Book of Monsters. He felt lucky his history book hadn’t been eaten.

Harry packed his Quidditch supplies carefully. Hopefully this year he’d actually get to play Quidditch. He really missed it, and he thought it would be exciting to play with a new team and new captain, now that Oliver Wood had graduated. He wondered who the Quidditch captain would be for Gryffindor. Perhaps Angelina Johnson, but she was in her last year already. Katie Bell still had a couple more years to go. Harry would be happy with either of them as his captain, so long as it wasn’t Fred or George Weasley. He imagined Quidditch practice with them as captain would be a lot of, “Alright, how many Bludgers can you lot dodge at once while singing ‘Pilfering, Pinking, Picksies’?”

Lunch was pleasant, if only because it was the first meal of the summer that James, Lily, Remus, Sirius, and Harry all got to eat together. Conversation was light, and stomachs were full. There was an anxious air about them, with Harry bursting to know where they were going, when they were going, and why they were going, but he knew none of his questions would be answered just yet.

A couple hours later, there were three trunks next to the front door and two bags of additional clothing. Harry was both eager and sad to leave. They said goodbye to Mellie, who saw them off
with a frown, and threatened to come with, but James ordered her to stay and take care of the house. Pickie had sandwiches ready for them, and Harry wished they could sit down for one last meal, at least. But they ate sandwiches and walked. James, Sirius, and Remus each levitated one of the trunks, and Lily and Harry each carried a bag.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.

“Shh,” Lily said, and stroked his hair flat out of habit. It, also out of habit, sprang right back into place. “I know you’re anxious, but we can’t talk about anything just yet.”

So the rest of their walk was in silence.

Harry had taken the path to the edge of the family property less than a week ago, but it still felt strangely unfamiliar. He realized just how expansive his family home was, and how much there was to explore. Not for the first time, he wondered when he would learn how to care for all these plants like his parents did. Perhaps after this business with Voldemort was over. Or, if he wasn’t going back to Hogwarts, maybe he’d learn this year. Maybe this was what his parents meant when they said he could learn better at home.

When they reached the small, crumbling stone wall, they found several wizards waiting for them.

James waved at them, and said, “Harry, I think you know most of them, but just in case, that’s Diggle in the top hat —”

“Do you remember me from your eighth birthday, Harry?” Diggle asked in a high, squeaky voice.

“And that’s Doge, the old one —”

Sirius laughed, and Doge coughed.

“—You’ve met him twice, and you remember Emmeline Vance, she’s a good family friend. The tall, black one is Kingsley Shacklebolt. He’s an Auror for the ministry. That’s Sturgis Podmore, with the blonde hair, and Hestia Jones with the dark hair. And you know Nymph—er, Tonks —and Mad-Eye, of course.”

Harry did know Tonks, but he hadn’t met her with purple hair before. Many other colors, but the purple was new.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she said with a grin.

Harry waved.

Mad-Eye Moody’s magical eye scanned them. “You look like the Potters, but how do we know it’s really you?”

“Last week,” James said, “you told me the secret ingredient in Molly’s butternut squash soup was nutmeg.”

“Ah,” Hestia said with a tiny smile. “That explains it.”

“Well, now that we all know,” Remus said, “perhaps we’d better get moving. It wouldn’t do to linger.”

“That’d be best,” Mad-Eye said. “Was hoping for a bit more cloud-cover, but this’ll do. Harry, get on your broom. We’ll be flying in —”
“Just a moment!” Lily pulled the bag off her shoulder. She pulled out a bunch of heavy cloaks and began to bundle Harry in two of them.

“Mum, it’s like thirty degrees out here,” he protested.

“It’ll be cold up there,” she said, and handed two cloaks to James as well. She did not bundle herself up.

“Aren’t you coming?” Harry asked.

Lily looked up at the skies. “I’m not one for flying long distances. I’ll meet you and your father there, though.”

“We can’t just Apparate?”

“We don’t want the Trace set off again,” James said.

And Harry remembered his mother’s reluctance to Apparate into the Muggle village. Even before the dementors had arrived, Lily and James must have suspected the Ministry wanted to find something to use against him. The Ministry wanted Harry expelled from Hogwarts and unable to perform magic.

“The Ministry can’t expect me to be skilled enough to Apparate.” But even as Harry said it, he felt like the Ministry would take anything they could and spin it against him.

“We also don’t want the Trace letting the Ministry know where you’re going,” Sirius said, “so strictly non-Trace-offending travel.”

“Meaning brooms,” James translated.

“Right, then. We’re going to be flying in close formation,” Mad-Eye said. “Tonks’ll be right in front of you, keep close on her tail. Your dad’ll be covering you from below. The rest’ll be circling us. We don’t break ranks for anything, got me? If one of us is killed —”

“Is that likely?” Harry looked to his parents for an answer, but Moody continued talking as if Harry hadn’t spoken.

“—the others keep flying, don’t stop, don’t break ranks. If they take out all of us and you survive, Harry, the rear guard are standing by to take over; keep flying east and they’ll join you.”

“Stop being so cheerful, Mad-Eye,” Tonks said as she mounted her Comet Two-Sixty. “He’ll think we’re not taking this seriously.”

“I’m taking this very seriously,” said Sirius with a grim expression. Then he winked at Harry.

Remus did a poor job of covering his laughter with a cough. Harry wanted to laugh, too, but his parents looked very pale, and he couldn’t seem to find the energy.

“Mount your brooms!”

James handed Harry his Firebolt.

Lily kissed Harry’s cheek. “Be safe,” she said.

“You’re sure you want to Apparate with everything?” James asked her.
She nodded. “Better than you flying with it.”

“Ready!” Moody shouted.

James and Lily exchanged a hasty kiss, and James joined the ranks of the other witches and wizards and mounted his broom.

“Push off!”

Harry kicked upwards and his broom shot into the air. As they climbed higher, Harry was grateful for his mother’s thoughtfulness. The cloaks kept him insulated as the warm summer evening disappeared into thin air and cold fronts.

The others fell into formation, and Harry stayed close behind Tonks. It wasn't hard, since her broom was much slower than his, and he was used to pursuing much smaller objects. His father was right below him, and Sirius took the spot above him.

“It’s about a five hour flight,” James shouted up at him. “If you get tired or anything —”

“I’ll be fine,” Harry shouted back. Five hours in the air after four days of being confined to the house sounded like a dream.

“Hey, Harry,” Sirius shouted from above. “If you need to piss, let your dad know so he can move out of the way first.”

“Padfoot, you son of a bitch!”

“They are my initials!”

Harry could hear Tonks laughing uncontrollably.

“Quiet!” Moody shouted at them, and took over Sirius’s position above Harry.

That continued for the rest of the flight. Every few minutes a new flier would swoop in over Harry and the old would cycle out. Remus replaced Mad-Eye, then it was Shacklebolt, Hestia Jones, Sturgis….

The country beneath them seemed to move lazily. It was so vast and green, dotted with only the occasional town. Harry saw why Muggles liked to hike the Cotswolds. They were quite pretty. Then the greenery turned to suburbs, the sun began to set, and the suburbs turned into twinkling stars below them.

The five hours had sounded nice at first, but before long, Harry was bored. Bored and cold. Five hours playing in the yard on his broom was one thing, five hours flying east was another. Harry tried to distract himself by practicing maneuvers, but Mad-Eye barked at him to stay in formation.

“Veer north,” Moody shouted at Tonks. “If someone’s on our tail —”

“We’re already far enough off course!” Tonks shouted back. “Don’t make a five hour flight ten!”

Finally, after Harry’s fingers and toes had frozen solid, and his lips were chapped and trembling, Mad-Eye called for a descent.

Harry followed Tonks downward, towards the sparkling lights of London. Remus replaced Moody’s position above Harry for the descent.
The small fleet landed on a dimly lit London street with a small park in the middle. A placard at the gate of the park read, “Grimmauld Place.”

“Is this —”

“Sh,” James said.

Moody handed Harry a torn slip of parchment. “Read this, memorize it.”

Harry looked down at the letters, written with a familiar slant.

*The headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Harry is reunited with his friends and gets (some) answers.

Watched A Series of Unfortunate Events today and it's pretty lit. Ever since I started teaching grammar I've worried I'm going to turn into Josephine Anwhistle, but considering my amazing beta ageofzero still catches several mistakes each week, I think I've still got a bit to learn.

“What’s the Order of th —”

“Not here, Potter!” Moody snatched the paper from Harry’s hand and pressed the tip of his wand to it. The paper burned from the wand tip to its edges, and Moody Vanished the ashes.

Harry stood on the sidewalk of Grimmauld Place and looked at the houses across from the park. They were numbered 10, 11, 13, 14…. But Harry did not see a number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

“What —”

“Think about what you memorized,” Remus said.

Harry looked at Number 11, then at Number 13, and thought, “The headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London,” and though he had not consciously registered the scrap of parchment as in Dumbledore’s writing, the words sounded like Dumbledore’s in his head.

No sooner had he recalled the words than did a solid black door with a large silver “12” appear between eleven and thirteen. Then, the rest of the house began to appear. It was as if eleven and thirteen slid apart to make way for twelve, though no one on the street seemed to notice, and no one in eleven or thirteen seemed to notice. The Muggles in the houses continued about their evening, and the witches and wizards beside Harry continued waiting patiently until Harry took a step towards the door.

The door seemed newly painted; the black was sleek and shiny, and the silver twelve seemed freshly polished. There was a door knocker in the shape of a serpent, and a bell pull to one side, but no doorknob that Harry could see.

Sirius stepped forward and put his wand to the door. Harry heard a series of locks turning, bolts unfastening, and even the noise of a chain moving. When the noises stopped, the door swung open, and Harry and his guard stepped inside.
“Quietly, now,” James said. “And don’t touch anything, Harry.”

Harry did as he was told, but as soon as the door closed behind Alastor Moody, he whispered, “Sirius, this is your house?”

“It was my mother’s,” Sirius said, “so, yes, I suppose that makes it mine.” He didn’t sound particularly pleased.

Harry looked around at the snake-shaped chandelier, snake-shaped candelabra, black wallpaper, and silver crown molding. He imagined what it would have been like to grow up in a house like this, then get sorted into Gryffindor. He felt like, in a single moment, he understood every bitter comment Sirius had made about his family home.

Harry was about to ask where his stuff had gotten to when he was grabbed and pulled into a very tight hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” his mother said, and kissed his forehead. She reached over Harry and pulled James close, too. “You took forever getting here.”

“Blame Mad-Eye,” James said. “Wanted to take us around the bleeding county.” He shivered, and Lily rubbed his arms.

“Oh!” someone said, quietly, but excitedly, and Harry was enveloped in another hug. This one was from Molly Weasley.

“Harry, we’re so glad you’re alright. We were all so worried after we heard about the dementors.”

When she finally let him go, Harry looked up at Mrs. Weasley. She was clearly thinner, and her eyes were heavy and rimmed red. She looked up at the collection of witches and wizards behind Harry and said, “He’s just arrived, the meeting’s started.”

Everyone began to move past Molly into the kitchen. Harry started to follow, but Lily grabbed his shoulder.

“Sorry, Harry, Order members only,” James said.

“How come I’m not in the Order?”

“Ron, Hermione, and Neville are upstairs,” Molly said. “You can wait with them. I’ll show you —”

“Neville and Hermione are here, too?” Harry asked. “And I didn’t even know about this place? How is that fair?”

“Don’t raise your voice,” Lily said, looking nervously at a set of curtains hanging along the hallway. “We’ll talk about all of this later —”

“You promised me answers —”

“After dinner,” James said. Harry could not remember any moment, in all his years, when his father had sounded so stern. “We’ll answer everything then, and talk more about this later. Upstairs, now.”

Harry did not understand, and he did not like not understanding. His parents were not the sort who told him to follow rules blindly. He could not remember ever being told, “Because we’ve said so.”
Everything had reasons and explanations. His parents were the ones who had taught him to question things that were suspicious, or rules that didn’t seem right. He’d been raised by two illegal Animagi, a Muggle-born witch, and a werewolf, and there were a lot of rules they all broke as a family, because rules were not the same thing as right and wrong.

And right now, Harry felt like his parents were very much in the wrong, and though he had fought with his parents before, this was new territory. He certainly respected their authority, but he’d never encountered a situation where his parents used their authority as an end-all to an argument.

Mrs. Weasley steered Harry up the steps before he could give voice to his frustration. “Step quietly,” she whispered.

Harry found himself skipping the fourth step out of habit. When they reached the landing, Mrs. Weasley pointed upstairs. “Keep your voice down,” she whispered. “I don’t want you waking anything up. It’s that door right there. You’ll be sleeping there, and your mother’s left your trunk there for you. Ron and Hermione should be in there, waiting for the meeting to be over. We’ll get you when it’s time for dinner.”

None of that sounded pleasant to Harry, whose stomach was rumbling so loud he thought it might wake whatever Mrs. Weasley was afraid of. He walked up the stairs, past a row of house-elf heads, mounted onto the wall. He shuddered in revulsion, and added it to a suddenly long list of reasons Sirius must have hated his family.

Harry opened the door to the bedroom he was to be staying in, and for the third time in the last half-hour, he was mobbed by another hug.

“Harry, you’re here!” Hermione said, and squeezed him as tightly as she could. “Ron, he’s here, Harry’s here! We didn’t hear you arrive! Oh, how are you? Are you alright? We’ve been so worried, I wanted to write you, but Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn’t — we’ve got so much to tell you, and you’ve got to tell us everything — the dementors! When we heard, we were so worried, and that Ministry hearing, it’s just outrageous. I’ve looked it all up, they simply can’t expel you, they just can’t, there’s provision in the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations —”

“Let him breathe, Hermione,” Ron said, practically pulling Hermione off of Harry. He, too, gave Harry a hug, though not as tight and not nearly as long.

Neville was sitting on one of the three beds in the room. He stood and waved at Harry. “Hi, Harry.”

“Hi, Neville.” Harry tried not to sound bitter, but he felt he couldn’t keep it out of his voice. His frustration had been briefly extinguished by the joy of seeing his friends, but it came back in full force as he looked at them, wondering why they got to be here, and he did not.

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence. Harry tried to decide which question he wanted answered first, which would most satisfy his frustration, and which would get the most information out of his friends.

“I’m glad you’re alright, Harry,” Neville said, an awkward thing to say after such a long pause.

Harry’s struggle for a good question was overcome by his most immediate frustration, and instead of politely thanking Neville, he said, “What are you all doing here, anyway?”

“It’s headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix,” Ron said.
That bit, Harry already knew. “What’s the Order of the Phoenix?”

“It’s a secret society Dumbledore founded,” Hermione said. “It’s the people who fought against You-Know-Who last time. And some new people, I think.”

“So you’re all in it?”

“Blimey, Harry, are you mad?” Ron said. “You know my Mum. You think she’d let her kids join some secret society to fight You-Know-Who?”

“Our parents are in it,” Neville said quietly. “That’s why we’re all here.”

“My parents are in it, too, aren’t they?” Harry said.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. “They said it was best if you were at home. I think they thought you’d be safer there —”

“Yeah, have any of you been attacked by dementors this summer?” His anger wasn’t really at Ron, Hermione, or Neville, but he couldn’t keep it out of his voice. How could his parents think home was any safer when that had happened?

“Well, you’re here now,” Neville offered. “Maybe they changed their minds because of the dementors.”

“Then I’m glad it happened.” Harry sat down on one of the beds and folded his arms over his chest. “If it hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re not worried about the hearing?” Hermione asked.

“Doesn’t matter anyway. My parents already decided I’m not going back to Hogwarts.”

“What?”

Harry told them what he’d overheard a few days ago, how his parents were considering teaching him at home instead of sending him back to school.

“That’s not so bad,” said Neville, who was not very good at school.

Hermione, rightly judging that Harry was moments from fighting with Neville, said quickly, “It sounds like your parents aren’t sure. Maybe when the Ministry trial is over, they’ll decide to keep you in Hogwarts.”

Harry didn’t think so. His mother had made a very valid point — if Voldemort could get to him at Hogwarts, what point was there in saying Hogwarts was safe? He didn’t blame his parents for wanting him to stay home, but what he really wanted was to go back to school, and as frustrated as he was by the idea that his parents might keep him at home, he was more frustrated that no one had even bothered to ask him what he thought.

There were two very loud cracks in quick succession, and Hermione yelped. Fred and George appeared in the middle of the bedroom.

“Stop doing that,” Hermione said.

“You passed your Apparition tests, then?” Harry asked.

“With distinction,” George grinned.
“Would’ve taken you about thirty seconds longer to walk down the stairs,” said Ron.

“Time is Galleons,” said Fred. “Anyway, you lot are interfering with our reception.” He waved a piece of string with something that looked like a dismembered ear attached to it. “We’re only picking up Harry’s whining, and none of the meeting.”

“I’m not — You can hear what’s going on downstairs?”

“If Mum catches you —” Ron started, but George interrupted.

“Worth the risk. That’s a major meeting they’re having down there,” he said.

The door opened and Ginny walked in. “No go on the Extendable Ears,” she said. “Mum’s put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door.”

“How can you tell?” asked Neville.

“Tonks told me. You chuck stuff at the door, and it can’t make contact if the door’s been Imperturbed. I’ve been flicking Dungbombs at it from the top of the stairs and they just soar away from it, so there’s no way the Extendable Ears will be able to get under the gap.”

“Shame,” Fred sighed, “I really fancied finding out what Snape’s been up to.”

“Snape’s in the Order?” This surprised Harry, though as soon as he said it, he thought it made sense. Snape was a former Death Eater whom Dumbledore trusted. He’d be invaluable to something like the Order. The question that logically followed, though, was whether or not Snape was truly trustworthy.

“Yeah.” George got up and closed the door before sitting on the bed beside Neville. Fred took the other side of Neville, and Ginny sat down by Hermione.

“He’s giving a report. Top secret, apparently.”

“Git,” Fred grumbled.

“He’s on our side now,” Hermione said.

“Doesn’t mean he isn’t a git,” Ron said.

Neville nodded approvingly.

“Bill doesn’t like him either,” said Ginny.

“Bill’s in the Order?” Harry asked. “I thought you said your Mum wouldn’t let you join the Order.”

“Yeah, well,” Fred leaned back against the wall and rested his hands behind his head, “she can’t do much about Bill and Charlie. Bill applied for a desk job at Gringotts so he could work for the Order. Says he misses the tombs in Egypt, but… there are other compensations.”

“Like what?”

“Fleur Delacour,” George said, with a terrible French accent, “has got a job at Gringotts to ‘eemprove ‘er Eenglish —”

“And Bill,” Fred snorted, “has been giving her a lot of private lessons.”
“Charlie’s busy making contacts in Romania,” said Ron. “Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible.”

Harry frowned. “Isn’t Percy in the Department of International Magical Cooperation? Couldn’t he do that?”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, where everyone exchanged awkward glances. Harry did not like being out of the loop, but he resisted the urge to demand answers.

“Percy’s not in the Order,” Ron finally said.

“Why not?”

“I think we’re well shut of him, to be honest,” said George, with a strangely nasty glare at an offensive stain on the carpet.

“What happened?”

“Percy and Dad had a row,” said Fred. “Can’t mention Percy in front of Mum without her crying anymore.”

“It was the first week after term ended,” Ron explained. “We were getting ready to leave to come here, since Mum’s got to manage headquarters for the Order. Percy came home and told us he’d been promoted.”

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Dad didn’t think so. I mean, he was promoted to Junior Assistant to the Minister. Which is great, and really good for someone only a year out of Hogwarts.”

“Too good,” Fred said, “even for Percy.”

“After the business with Crouch last year,” explained George, “a lot of people were unhappy with Percy’s department. Seemed to think it odd that no one noticed their boss was being Polyjuice-Potioned.”

“Yeah, but that was Barty Crouch impersonating his dad,” Harry said. “He’d know just how to act like his dad, wouldn’t he? Be hard for anyone to notice.”

“True,” Fred said, “except they overhauled the whole department. No one else got promoted. Most people got demoted, in fact.”

Harry frowned. “So why not Percy?”

“Dad said…” Ron hesitated. “Well, the Minister knows our family’s close with Dumbledore and your family, and he’s always thought dad was a bit of a weirdo with his Muggle obsession. And Fudge has made it clear anyone who’s in league with Dumbledore can clear out their desks.”

“Dumbledore’s name’s mud with the Ministry these days,” George said. “They stripped him of his Wizengamot position and everything.”

“Your dad’s not much good in the Ministry either, these days,” Fred added to Harry.

“Even my Gran’s letters are going unopened,” Neville said quietly. “They’re not happy with anyone who’s got history with Dumbledore.”
“What does all this have to do with Percy?” Harry asked.

“Getting to that,” Ron said. “Dad reckoned that Fudge only wanted Percy in his office because he wants to use him to spy on the family and on Dumbledore.”

Harry looked at each Weasley, looking for someone to disagree with Ron, or give him a different answer. It didn’t sound ridiculous, exactly, but it sounded too awful to be real.

“And your dad told Percy?” he asked, when no one else volunteered any contradictory information.

“Dad tried to be nice about it,” Ron said. “We couldn’t exactly hide that we were leaving, but no one wanted to tell Percy we were in the Order. Dad just sort of... asked Percy if Percy had considered the possibility Fudge had promoted him to use him, and Percy went completely berserk. I think he was mad Dad wasn’t proud of him, but he completely lost it and said loads of terrible stuff. Said he’d been having to struggle against Dad’s lousy reputation ever since he joined the Ministry and that Dad’s got no ambition and that’s why we’ve always been — you know — not had a lot of money, I mean.”

“He said all that?” Harry let out a low whistle.

“Never seen Dad yell so much before,” Fred said. “He was furious, said Percy had no right to talk like that, told Percy he wasn’t much better than Fudge if he was going to bury his head in the sand.”

“Then Percy made it worse,” Ron said, “and told Dad he was an idiot to run around with Dumbledore that Dumbledore was heading for big trouble and Dad was going to go down with him, and that he — Percy — knew where his loyalty lay and it was with the Ministry. And if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry, he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn’t belong to our family anymore. He packed his bags the same night and left. He’s living here in London now.”

Harry didn’t know which part of that story hurt the most. That Percy had been so rude to his father, had chosen the Ministry over his family, or that he refused to believe Harry’s story about Voldemort.

“He honestly thinks your mum and dad would risk everything without proof?” Harry asked.

Ron looked down at the floor, and Harry noticed no one but Neville was making any eye contact with him.

“Your name got dragged into it too,” Fred finally said.

“Percy said the only evidence was your word,” said Ron, “and he didn’t think that was good enough.”

“Percy takes the *Daily Prophet* seriously,” Hermione said, voice unusually sour.

“What does that mean? Rita Skeeter’s been writing more articles about me? I haven’t seen anything—”

“No,” Hermione said, “that’s a different story, actually, that I need to tell you — but the *Prophet* has been, well, building on her stuff.”

Harry hated the way Hermione casually slipped in some secret about Rita Skeeter. Now he had to decide which questions to ask.
“What have they been saying about me?”

“Remember how she wrote that you were collapsing all over the place and saying your scar was hurting and all that?”

“Hard to forget.”

“Well, they’re writing about you as though you’re this deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something, and your parents are in it too, like they’re deluded into thinking you’re some wonder-child.” She said this very quickly, as if that might make it easier for Harry to hear. “They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears they say something like ‘a tale worthy of Harry Potter,’ and if anyone has a funny accident or anything it’s ‘let’s hope he hasn’t got a scar on his forehead or we’ll be asked to worship him next.’”

“I don’t want anyone to worship me.”

“I know you don’t, but don’t you see what they’re doing? They want to turn you into someone nobody will believe. They want wizards on the street to think you’re just some stupid boy who’s a bit of a joke, who tells ridiculous tall stories because he loves being famous and wants to keep it going.”

Harry didn’t understand. How could anyone want what he had? These headaches, the nightmares, the secrets — How could anyone think a little bit of fame, which wasn’t even all that interesting to Harry anyway, be worth everything he went through?

“And of course they didn’t report a word of the dementors attacking you,” Hermione said. “Someone’s told them to keep that quiet. That should’ve been a really big story, out-of-control dementors. They haven’t even reported that you broke the International Statute of Secrecy. We thought they would, it would tie in so well with this image of you as some stupid show off, but we think they’re biding their time until you’re expelled, then they’re really going to town — I mean, if you’re expelled, obviously, though you really shouldn’t be, not if they abide by their own laws, there’s no case against you.”

As much as Harry appreciated Hermione, she talked far too much, and he did not want to think about his trial. He quickly changed the subject.

“What’s this about Rita Skeeter?” he asked.

Hermione’s smile was unusually sly, and even Fred and George chuckled.

“Well,” she said, “you remember last year, I couldn’t figure out how she’d been getting all those quotes and stories, or how she was spying on the students?”

“Yeah, of course I remember.”

“I finally figured it out and caught her — your comment about ‘bugging’ helped me figure it out. She’s an illegal Animagus, and uses her animal form as a jeweled beetle to get places she isn’t allowed.”

Fred, though he tried, could not suppress a hearty laugh, and it came out as a snort. “Hermione caught her at the end of term and is blackmailing her into keeping her mouth shut about you.”

Harry was quite impressed. Hermione, rule-following, perfect-grade student that she was, could be incredibly vicious when the opportunity presented itself, and Harry loved that about her.
“Uh-oh,” Fred said suddenly. He tugged on the Extendable Ear and he and George vanished with two loud cracks.

Moments later, Mrs. Weasley knocked on the door and pushed it open.

“The meetings over,” she said. “You can all come down for dinner. Everyone’s dying to see you, Harry. And who’s left all those Dungbombs outside the kitchen door?”

“Puck,” Ginny said, without hesitation. “He loves playing with them.”

“Oh. You might want to keep your cat in your room, you know. There’s a lot of things he could get into trouble with in this house. Now, don’t forget to keep your voices down in the hall. Ginny, your hands are filthy! What have you been doing? Go and wash them before dinner, please.”

As Molly left, Ginny made a face at the others, then followed her mother out of the room.

Now that Fred, George, and Ginny were gone, Hermione, Ron, and Neville looked anxiously at Harry.

“You really are alright, aren’t you?” Hermione asked.

“You’re not too upset with us for not writing, are you?” Ron asked.

“You can yell at us if you want,” Neville suggested in a timid voice.

Harry did not know how anyone could yell at Neville — except perhaps Snape, but as already established, Snape was a git.

“It’s my parents’ fault, isn’t it?” Harry said. Yes, he was frustrated with his friends, but he was far more angry with his parents. “Let’s go downstairs. I’m starved from that flight.”

The four of them started down the stairs, but they had only made it to the landing when Ron grabbed Harry’s arm.

“Hold on — they’re still in the hall. We might be able to hear something.”

The four of them leaned over the banisters. The hallway beneath them was packed with witches and wizards. Harry recognized most of them. His guard from earlier that evening, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall were all there, as well as Cedric Diggory’s parents and a few wizards Harry did not know.

“The Diggorys are in the Order?” Harry whispered, then remembered what Dumbledore had said to them at the end of last year, and how they’d promised their support.

“Yeah, Cedric’s around here somewhere,” Ron said, and looked upstairs. “Keeps to himself, mostly, though.”

Above them, Fred and George were carefully lowering an Extendable Ear towards the small crowd, but everyone moved away to the door before anyone could catch anything. Harry heard Fred whisper a curse under his breath and pull the ear back up.

Then the front door opened and closed, and they knew there was nothing more to be gained by eavesdropping.

As they continued down the stairs, Hermione whispered to Harry, “Don’t forget to keep your voice down in the hall, Harry.”
Before Harry could ask what everyone was so terrified of waking, there was a crash at the door.

“Tonks!” Mrs. Weasley cried.

“I’m sorry!”

As Harry came around the corner, he saw Tonks lying flat on the floor. Sirius and Remus were standing over her, pocketing their wands.

“It’s that stupid umbrella stand,” she whined. “It’s the second time I’ve tripped over it —”

The house was filled suddenly with a blood-curdling scream. Harry’s hands flew to his ears, and the curtains in the hallway flew open, revealing a old woman, screaming like she was being tortured with the Cruciatux Curse. It took Harry a moment to realize she was not a real woman, but a portrait, dressed in all black, her hair pulled up in a black cap, face old, wrinkled, and beginning to turn yellow like old parchment. Drool escaped from her mouth and her eyes rolled in her head as she screamed. Other portraits began to wake up and yell, too, so the entire house sounded like it was screaming in agony.

Sirius and Remus rushed forward and tried to pull the curtains closed, but an invisible force seemed to be fighting them. The woman reached out, as if she could emerge from the portrait and rip their faces with her claw-like hands.

“Filth!” she shrieked. “Blood-traitor, abomination, half-breeds, mutants —”

“You horrible hag,” Sirius grunted as he tried to shove the curtain forward. “Go back to —”

“Shame of my flesh! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers! How dare —”

“Oh, do shut up,” someone else shouted at the portrait as he pushed his way between Harry and Ron.

Regulus Black grabbed Remus’ s curtain and together, the Black brothers forced the curtains closed.

Sirius and Remus were panting from the effort, and Regulus’s nostrils flared slightly, but otherwise, he looked unperturbed.

Sirius smiled at Harry ruefully. “Well, congratulations, Harry, you’ve met our mother.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
The kitchen was crowded and chaotic, and Harry, despite his frustration with his parents, loved it. Large, cast iron pots and pans hung overhead. Smoke was thick in the air, and chairs were crowded around a long, plain wooden table that looked more like it was meant for preparing food than for serving it on.

Molly, Lily, and Frank Longbottom were hard at work cooking dinner for a small army. That small army included the entire Weasley family — sans Percy, but including Molly’s older brothers Fabian and Gideon Prewett — the Diggorys, the Longbottoms, Regulus, Sirius, Remus, James, Lily, Tonks, and a wizard Harry had never met before, a small man in old smelly rags. Sirius introduced him as Mundungus Fletcher.

“Please’ ta meet you, ‘arry,” Mundungus said, and gave Harry’s hand a hearty shake.

As Harry pulled his hand away, he had the odd sensation it was now coated in some sort of oil or sweat. He almost rubbed his hand clean on his jeans, but thought better of it and grabbed a napkin off the table.

Arthur Weasley, Bill Weasley, and Gideon Prewett were poring over a pile of scrolls of parchment that looked something like building plans. They didn’t seem to notice Harry until James cleared his throat.

Mr. Weasley stood and reached out for a handshake. “Harry! Good to see you.”

Harry smiled and returned the greeting and handshake, but his eyes wandered over Mr. Weasley’s shoulder, to Bill, hastily scooping up the scrolls.

“Journey alright, Harry?” Bill asked. His dragon fang earring glinted, despite the dim light in the kitchen. “Mad-Eye didn’t make you come via Normandy did he?”

“He tried,” Tonks said, and began to help Bill with the parchment. She tipped over a candle and though the flame snuffed out before it caught the paper, hot wax spilled over one of the scrolls. “Oh — I’m so sorry —”
“S’alright,” Gideon Prewett grunted. He pointed his wand and Vanished the wax.

As Bill took the last of the parchment, Gideon stepped around the table to shake Harry’s hand.

“Been a couple years,” Gideon said. He was a short man, wide-set like his sister Molly, with thinning red hair and a large nose. “You’re nearly as tall as your dad now, aren’t you?”

“Nearly,” Harry said.

“Fabian and I would’ve come to get you, but he’s not so good dueling on a broom these days—”

“I keep saying,” interrupted a man who looked a lot like someone had taken Gideon and stretched him out like a piece of taffy then lopped off one of his arms, “if they made brooms with rear controls for feet, like those Muggle contraptions, with the pedals and the handles — What do you call those things?” Fabian Prewett looked around the kitchen, eyes searching out Arthur, Lily, or Sirius, who each had a fairly decent knowledge of Muggle contraptions.

“They wheeled things?” Arthur asked.

“Bicycles,” Lily called from the stove, where she was adding vegetables to a stew.

“Yes!” Fabian said. “Bicycles, but you make them without the handles, just the spot to put your feet, and you can steer there, then I’d be able to duel without holding onto a broom.”

“That sounds difficult to put on a broom,” Gideon said.

“If Muggles can ride horses and shoot arrows,” said Sirius, setting a freshly uncorked bottle of wine on the table, “surely we can invent a broom you can use without hands.”

“I know a bloke that’ll get you cheap brooms to try it out on,” Mundungus Fletcher said, and began to pour the wine into three glasses. He handed one to Fabian, one to Gideon, and the third to Sirius. He took the bottle for himself. “Could get you a few, for a small fee, o’ course.”

“If you want dinner before midnight, we could use a hand,” Mrs. Weasley announced loudly. “No, Harry, Remus, you’ve had a long journey, stay where you are.” She directed her stern gaze on her children and husband specifically, and Ron and Ginny began to pull dinner dishes from the cupboards.

Harry took a seat at the long table beside Regulus and Remus. James and Sirius slipped in-between the busy cooks, causing more trouble than help, really, as they snuck samples of dinner, until Lily put them on dish duty. Alice Longbottom and Tonks tried to be helpful, but after Tonks nearly dropped a knife on Fred’s foot, and Alice nearly sliced off George’s finger levitating it back onto the counter, they were shooed out of the way by Frank and Molly.

“You’re not much help in the kitchen either?” Harry asked Regulus, as Tonks and Mrs. Longbottom took seats at the other end of the long table, closer to the chaos of the kitchen, but out of the way of everyone’s feet and knives.

“House-elves did all the work when I lived here before,” Regulus said as he watched everyone work. “Don’t know where Sirius learned to use a sponge.”

Harry thought he saw the briefest flicker of sadness on Regulus’s face as he watched Sirius hand a dripping dish to James. Harry was surprised, because Regulus so rarely expressed emotion, but before Harry could ask if Regulus was alright, Regulus’s face cleared and he changed the subject.
“How was your flight?” Regulus asked. “Does a Firebolt handle well for a long journey?”

This was the one topic of conversation Harry and Regulus could discuss without broaching into the dangerous territory of Voldemort and the graveyard, so Harry jumped on it, and eagerly talked about the mechanics of broomhandling and the smooth flight he’d had. He brought up the maneuvers he’d tried practicing, and soon he and Regulus were exchanging Quidditch techniques and Seeker tricks they’d learned during their time playing Quidditch.

“Where’s Cedric?” Harry asked, knowing this was a conversation Cedric would be interested in.

Mrs. Diggory swept past him and pulled cloth napkins from a cupboard. “He’s probably resting upstairs.” She cast a dark look at Fred and George. “I don't think he gets much sleep in the evenings.”

Fred took the napkins from Mrs. Diggory, who said she would try to rouse Cedric, and sat down next to Harry. He began levitating the napkins onto the plates Ginny and Ron had already set out.

“She’s got it backwards,” he grumbled to Harry. “She thinks George and I stay up late experimenting and it keeps Ced from sleeping. He’s the one who’s having nightmares all night so we stay up working because we can't sleep.”

Harry was slightly comforted to know he wasn't the only one with nightmares from the graveyard, but he decided his and Cedric’s nightmares were not a conversation to have with Fred Weasley.

He tried for a cheery tone. “Joke shop’s still on, then?”

“She won't see it?”

“She stopped getting the Prophet after all the stuff they said about you.” Fred set the last napkin down and looked over at Remus and Regulus. “Can I count on you two to keep your silence, or shall I Obliviate this conversation from your memories?”

Remus laughed. “I think the shop is a particularly clever idea. I certainly wouldn't want to put your ambitions in jeopardy.”

Regulus said nothing, but waved his hand as if Fred was free to continue helping put dinner on the table without concern.

“If you want to be any help, we’re always looking for researchers who are willing to experiment.” Fred winked at them and got up from the table.

“I don’t recommend it,” Remus said, still smiling.

“What?” asked Harry.

“Volunteering for research. I’ve heard the two of them sick to their stomachs more often than not this summer.”

Harry wondered what it was they were researching that could make them so sick. Fred and George were clever, perhaps not the sort of clever that got them good grades, but they knew what they wanted despite that.
“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Regulus,” Harry said. “Mum said you were laid up for a while this summer.”

“I was,” Regulus picked up one of the silver goblets and looked at the family crest embossed into it. “The Dark Lord’s snake has a rather nasty bite. We couldn’t get the wound to close. But your mother was able to use my blood to brew an antidote to that snake venom for me. It took a couple weeks, but she’s quite skilled with potions. Honestly, I feel better than I’ve felt in… well, in quite a long time.”

Harry, who had experienced dementors five times in his life for very brief increments, and had passed out three of those five times, could not imagine what Regulus, who had spent twelve years in Azkaban, felt like on most days. It was good to hear he was improving.

“Well enough to walk around,” Sirius said, sliding into a seat next to Remus, “and yet you always disappear when there’s cleaning to be done.”

Regulus’s jaw tightened. “Forgive me if I don’t feel like participating in the plundering of our family home.”

“It’s not plundering, it’s binning dark objects that don’t do anything but cause trouble.” Sirius looked at the goblet in Regulus’s hand. “It’s not like I’m trying to sell family heirlooms just because they’re fifteenth century goblin-wrought silver.”

“You would, though. You only don’t because I’m here.”

Sirius did not argue this point with Regulus, but he did not look scolded, either.

Harry thought of all the things in his family attic and how his father had reacted when Lily had suggested vanishing it all. He supposed his father’s feelings about his great-great-grandmother’s fabric, or his grandfather’s homemade potions recipes would be different from Sirius’s feelings about his family heirlooms. Sirius would probably be quite happy to be rid of a snake-shaped chandelier or candelabra.

“That reminds me, Remus,” Sirius began, “I think there’s a boggart up in the writing desk upstairs. Mind having a look at it?”

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked exhausted to Harry, and Harry felt bad that Remus had flown halfway across the country just to keep him safe.

“I’ll see if I can. Maybe ask Moody to do it? He’ll be able to tell more quickly if it’s something worse.”

James slipped into the seat beside Harry. “Can’t be worse than what we’ve already cleared out of this house.” He shivered. “Harry, why’d you have to go and find a dementor? It’s bad enough being in this place for a night or two. Can’t imagine what the next few weeks will be like.”

“Don’t complain,” Sirius said. “You and Lils get to stay in my room. I’ve been edged out into sharing with Regulus. We haven’t shared a room since I was six.”

“There’s plenty of space in the master bedroom,” Regulus said. “I don’t see why you and Remus have to cram yourselves into my room.”

The kitchen door opened again, and Mrs. Diggory returned with Cedric right behind her. Harry resisted the urge to openly gape when he saw Cedric.
It was obvious Cedric hadn’t been sleeping, just as Mrs. Diggory had said. There were heavy shadows under his eyes, and though he’d always had rather sharp cheekbones, his face seemed unusually gaunt. His broad shoulders sagged under some sort of invisible weight, and there wasn’t much color to his cheeks. If he didn’t look exactly how Harry felt most nights, Harry would have asked if he was sick. But before he could say anything to Cedric, Mrs. Weasley started shouting.

“Fred — George — NO, JUST CARRY THEM!”

She was too late, however, as a large cauldron of hot stew, a pitcher of butterbeer, and a breadboard with a knife soared over the table at a speed comparable to Harry’s Firebolt. Harry, James, Sirius, Remus, and Regulus all ducked out of the way as the cauldron skidded along the table, and the knife struck into the wood, right where Regulus had been sitting. The butterbeer crashed into the table, its contents spilling onto the floor, and the bread tumbled off its board, which landed with a clatter.

“FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE! THERE WAS NO NEED — I’VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS — JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE ALLOWED TO USE MAGIC NOW YOU DON’T HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!”

“We were just trying to save a little time,” George said, waving his wand again and righting the breadboard.

Harry, James, Sirius, and Remus were all laughing. Regulus was pressed up against the china cabinet like a spooked cat who wanted to crawl under it.

“Sorry,” said Fred, as he pulled the knife out of the table. “Didn’t mean to.”

“Boys,” Mr. Weasley said, as he used his wand to repair the butterbeer flagon, “your mother’s right. You’re supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you’ve come of age —”

“ — none of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!” Mrs. Weasley continued, as if her husband hadn’t spoken. “Bill didn’t feel the need to Apparate every few feet! Charlie didn’t Charm everything he met! Percy —”

The room suddenly felt very still. Mr. Weasley’s face became very hard, and Mrs. Weasley looked like she might burst into tears, her anger suddenly overwhelmed with grief.

Lily stepped forward and pulled the cauldron of stew into the center of the table. “Why don’t we get started? I think we’ve got quite a few empty stomachs that need filling.”

Harry’s stomach rumbled in agreement. Everyone took seats at the table and began passing down bowls of stew and slices of bread.

“It looks wonderful, Molly, and Frank and Lily,” Remus said.

Conversation began slowly, but eventually the table was full of loud chatter and laughter. Tonks was doing unusually shaped noses for Ginny and Hermione. Bill, Amos Diggory, Mr. Weasley, and Remus were discussing goblin rights and the role goblins might play in the fight against Voldemort. Fred, George, Ron, and Neville were listening to Mundungus Fletcher share a story about a business transaction that didn’t sound exactly legal. James, Lily, Sirius, and Mrs. Longbottom were having a heated argument over wizard chess strategies. Mr. Longbottom and Fabian and Gideon Prewett were talking quietly about something Harry couldn’t hear from his end of the table, but he did catch the words, “locked,” and, “Fudge,” and “harpy.” Harry wished suddenly he was on that end of the table, but instead he was sitting between Regulus and Cedric,
with Mrs. Diggory across from him.

“How’s your summer been?” Harry asked Cedric.

“Quiet,” Cedric said. He glanced up at his mother. She was listening politely, and Harry wondered why Cedric looked so furtive.

“We’ve mostly been cleaning this house,” Cedric said. “Making it habitable. I never knew so much Dark magic could exist in such a small space.”

“The house was empty for quite some time,” Regulus said. “There was space for lots of things to fester, unfortunately.”

“It seems odd that the house-elf did nothing in all that time, though,” said Mrs. Diggory.

“Kreacher is very old.” Regulus tapped his wand against his goblet and it filled with water. “There’s not much he can do these days.”

Harry did, however, think it was odd he hadn’t seen the Black family house-elf since he had arrived. He wondered if Kreacher was old and cranky like Mellie, or if he hid out of everyone’s way because he was shy like Picksie. Or perhaps he was somewhat like Dobby, and he’d simply been asked to stay out of the way of the Order of the Phoenix.

“How’s your summer been, Harry?” Cedric asked.

“Quiet, except for the dementors.”

“Amos said you cast a Patronus,” Mrs. Diggory said, clearly impressed. “That’s quite a lot for a young wizard.”

Harry wasn’t sure what part of her words was condescending, but he had the strangest feeling he was being talked down to.

“Yeah, well,” Harry said, “I had to learn in my third year, because of the dementors around the school, and I had to practice a lot to keep up in the Triwizard Tournament, so, I guess I learned a lot.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Wonderful wasn’t the word Harry might’ve chosen, but he thought he understood what she meant.

The general chatter continued steadily through dessert. Rhubarb crumble and custard were passed around in copious helpings. Harry found himself missing Mellie’s scones, but it was only a small pain. Ginny found space on the floor and flicked butterbeer corks under the table for Crookshanks and Puck to chase. Regulus watched her rather closely, and Harry wondered just how much cat was in Regulus. Sometimes he thought Sirius was more dog than person, and Regulus had spent quite a lot of time as a cat. He half-expected Regulus to leap from the table and onto the floor to dart after a cork.

Tonks yawned, and Mundungus leaned back in his chair. Within minutes, he was snoring loudly.

“Time for bed, I think,” Mrs. Weasley said and yawned, too. She started clearing dishes.

“Dad,” Harry said, patience finally reaching its end, “you promised we’d talk tonight.”

“Yeah, of course,” James said, pushing his plate away. He took his glasses off and began to clean
them on his shirt. “Well, dinner’s over, so ask away.”

“Hold on,” Ron said, and looked up at his parents. “We’ve been asking questions for weeks, and you keep telling us no, but all of a sudden Harry shows up and gets his questions answered?”

“What Mr. and Mrs. Potter decide about raising Harry is their choice,” Mrs. Weasely said, jaw set in a hard line as she gathered empty plates. “All of the rest of you are to go upstairs to bed.”

“That’s not fair,” Neville said, and looked at his parents imploringly. “If Harry can ask questions, can’t I ask questions?”

“We’re seventeen!” Fred said. “You can’t make us go to bed, not if Harry’s getting answers.”

“You’re not in the Order,” Mrs. Longbottom said in a gentle voice. “There are things we simply can’t tell you.”

“Then I want to join,” said George.

“You’re not allowed!” Mrs. Weasely shouted, and the dishes hit the counter with a loud clatter.

“Mrs. Weasely’s right,” Lily said. “The Order is for of-age wizards only.”

“But —” Fred protested.

“Of-age and graduated wizards,” Lily finished.

“How old were you when you joined?” Harry demanded.

“Eighteen,” she said.

James, Sirius, and Remus all nodded. Harry looked at Regulus before remembering Regulus had not joined the Order of the Phoenix the first time around.

“We were all graduated from Hogwarts,” James said, “and we knew the risks. However,” he glanced at Molly warily, “we understand you’ve all been through quite a bit together, and you have a lot of questions. Your mother and I have promised you, Harry, no secrets, and we’ll tell you everything we can. We’d prefer you get the information from us rather than... somewhere else,” he looked at Fred and George, clearly not convinced their efforts at eavesdropping had been entirely thwarted, “but what the Weasleys, Longbottoms, and Diggorys decide is up to them.”

Molly pressed her lips into a firm line. “Well. Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, I want all of you out of the kitchen, now.

“You’re not my mother,” Hermione said quickly.

“We’re of age!” Fred and George said together.

“If Harry’s allowed, why can’t I?” asked Ron.

“Mum, I want to know!” Ginny said from the floor.

“No! I absolutely forbid —”

“Molly,” Mr. Weasely said with a heavy sigh, “you can’t stop Fred and George. They are of age.”

“Fine. Ron, Hermione, Gin —”
“Harry will tell me and Hermione everything you say,” Ron said quickly.

“And me too,” Neville added, looking hopefully at Harry.

Harry, though he knew it might risk his parents’ trust in him, also knew it would be unwise to lie. “Yeah, I would.”

Mrs. Weasley was red in the face as she said, “Ginny, bed, now!”

“But Mum, please!” Ginny begged.

“Ah, she’s alright,” Fabian said. “She’s a strong girl. She can handle it.”

Mrs. Weasley cast a dark look at her brother. “I will kindly thank you not to tell me how to raise my children.” Her arms were folded tightly over her chest, and she held the door open with her wand.

Ginny waited one more moment, for her father, her other uncle, or anyone to come to her defense, but no one did. No one else seemed willing to push Mrs. Weasley any further than she already had been. So Ginny sulked out and made as much noise on the staircase as she could. Portraits sprang to life, shrieking over her pounding footsteps. Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom ran to quiet them.

“Cedric,” Amos Diggory said, “you’ve been awfully quiet. Do you also want to stay and ask questions?”

“I’d like to,” he said quietly, hands wrapped around his cup of butterbeer, “but I don’t mean to cause trouble.”

Mr. Diggory laughed. “Think there’s already been enough trouble. You’re nearly eighteen. You’re welcome to stay.”

Mrs. Diggory looked about half as furious as Mrs. Weasley, but she did not challenge her husband.

“Alright, Harry,” Lily said. “What do you want to know?”

There were so many things that Harry wanted to know, he wasn’t sure where to start. “What’s Voldemort planning?” he asked, ignoring the shudder that ran down the table. “Why hasn’t the Prophet reported any attacks on Muggles?”

“As far as we know,” Mrs. Longbottom said, “there haven’t been any attacks on Muggles.”

“And we know quite a bit. More than he thinks we do, anyway,” Gideon Prewett said with a hearty but humorless laugh.

Remus’s mouth twisted into a grim sort of half-smile. “We know… enough.”

“Why wouldn’t he be killing people?” Neville asked. His voice trembled as he started, but he seemed to find his stride midway through. “Why would he just stop hurting Muggles?”

James and Sirius wore matching smiles.

“Harry messed his return up spectacularly,” said Sirius.

“His comeback didn’t turn out how he wanted,” James said. “No one was supposed to know he’d returned, apart from his Death Eaters, but you two survived.” James looked at Harry and Cedric,
and Harry recognized something in his father’s face that he’d only seen once before.

The Potters were the sort of family that always faced danger with a brave face. Harry, James, and Lily all knew what trouble looked like, and none of them had any qualms about meeting it head on. Harry had learned from his parents that you could not be good without also being brave. That did not mean Harry was never scared, and he knew from many conversations with his mother that she experienced fear, but Harry had only seen his father scared, truly honestly terrified, once.

On the night Voldemort had returned, James had been worried over Harry and Lily’s safety, and Harry had watched his father express true fear, perhaps coupled by his utter helplessness. But that fear had been brief, and James had put on his best brave face. That was the face that Harry saw now: brave, but there was something he was still very afraid of.

There was no way to know what that fear was rooted in; it was a generally fearful time for everyone. It still unsettled Harry, and he shifted in his seat. He briefly longed for a time when he was younger, when he could see his parents as unflappable heroes, when they could whisk Harry away from any danger or show him how to face any fear. But now, they were all facing the unfaceable fear of Voldemort’s return, and the danger they were all in was not one they could walk away from.

“How did our surviving help?” Cedric asked.

“The last person Voldemort wanted alerted of his return was Dumbledore,” Lily said. “And you two made sure Dumbledore knew right away. We were able to regroup immediately. We were able to save Regulus. Within an hour, the Order of the Phoenix had reconvened, with Dumbledore at its head.”

“What does the Order do, then?” Harry asked.

“Stop You-Know-Who’s plans,” Mr. Weasley said simply.

“Which are what?” Harry prompted.

Every adult looked at James and Lily. Harry did not understand why, and he watched a frustratingly silent conversation pass between James and Lily before Remus spoke.

“For one,” Remus said, “he’s raising his army again. In the old days he had vast numbers at his command — witches and wizards he would bully or bewitch into following him, his faithful Death Eaters, a great variety of Dark creatures. He’s planning to recruit giants, for one. It would be quite foolish of him to take on the Ministry with a few dozen Death Eaters.”

“The best thing we can do,” Tonks said, “is convince people he’s back. That’ll put their guard up. The Ministry, of course, isn’t making it easy. They’re refusing to admit that he’s come back.”

“By why?” asked Ron. “If Dumbledore —”

“That’s just it,” said Mr. Weasley. “Dumbledore. Fudge thinks Dumbledore’s planning to overthrow him and become Minister of Magic.”

“That’s ridiculous!” spluttered Hermione. “Dumbledore would never!”

“Of course not,” said James. “Plenty of people wanted Dumbledore to take the position when Millicent Bagnold retired, but he refused to. Fudge came to power instead, and he’s never quite forgotten how much popular support Dumbledore had.”
“Fudge knows Dumbledore’s a better wizard than he is,” said Sirius, “but he’s so fond of power now, he’s become too confident. He’s managed to convince himself he’s the clever one, and Dumbledore’s simply stirring up trouble for the sake of it.”

“How could he think that Dumbledore would just make it all up?” Fred demanded, setting his mug down a bit harder than it deserved. “That Cedric and Harry would just lie?”

Lily ran a hand through her long hair. “The war was… It was a very trying time for everyone. Certainly for Fudge, who’s not nearly competent enough to handle this sort of situation.” Her mouth twisted into a look of disgust that reminded Harry briefly of Narcissa Malfoy. “Fudge can’t bring himself to face the idea that Voldemort’s returning. It’s preferable to believe that Dumbledore is lying to grab power.”

“And that’s the rub,” said Fabian. “The more the Ministry denies it, the harder it is for people to believe us. Makes people easy targets for the Imperius Curse.”

“But you’re telling people, aren’t you?” asked George.

“Of course we are,” said Mr. Diggory. “Or, we’re doing our best, anyway.”

“We have to keep our involvement a secret at the Ministry,” Mr. Weasley said, and exchanged a sympathetic eye with Mr. Diggory. “Wouldn’t do to lose our jobs and become useless to the Order.”

“And I’m not the sort to get invited to many dinner parties,” Remus said with a faint smile.

“Not since Snape ran his mouth,” Sirius said, the name dripping from his mouth like acid.

“And unfortunately, the Ministry and the Prophet have done a fair bit of legwork to get Dumbledore and I discredited,” James said with a frown. “Fudge wasn’t too happy with how your mother and I behaved to him after the Triwizard Tournament.”

“I know you haven’t really been reading the Prophet, Harry,” said Lily, “but they haven’t been very kind to you.”

“Hermione said as much. Why couldn’t you tell me yourself?”

Lily bit down on the inside of her cheek. “You have a lot you’re dealing with. With your… nightmares and everything, we didn’t think you needed more to worry about.”

Mrs. Diggory made a soft, “Oh,” noise, that Harry thought could easily be followed up with several sad endearments, like, “you poor thing,” or, “darling.” He felt at once pitied and uncomfortable with it, just as he had felt when she’d been unintentionally condescending earlier.

“Well, now I know,” he said flatly.

Lily tapped her fingers against her mug. “They haven’t been kind to me and your father, either.”

“We’re a pair of deluded parents, who have praised you too much and given you your horrible complexes.” James smiled wearily. “Parents who are too blinded to see their child for what he is.”

Harry’s parents praised him, sure, but he got in trouble for quite a bit. He supposed even spoiled children didn’t think of themselves as spoiled, but he certainly didn’t feel spoiled by his parents. Maybe a little by Sirius, but not by his mother and father.
“And Dumbledore,” said Bill, “made a speech about You-Know-Who’s return to the Wizengamot and was removed from his position as Chief Warlock. They’re talking about taking away his Order of First Class, too.”

“If Dumbledore doesn’t keep his head down,” said Mrs. Longbottom, “he’ll end up thrown in Azkaban. That’s the last thing we need.”

“Without Dumbledore,” Regulus said in a low voice that made Harry jump, because he’d forgotten that Regulus was sitting right next to him, “the Dark Lord will have a clear field to take over the Ministry. Dumbledore is the only person the Dark Lord fears, and without him, we’re truly powerless.”

His eyes flicked over Harry, and Harry was very conscious of his scar, hidden beneath his dark messy hair, then Regulus met James and Lily’s intense gaze. Harry smelled a secret here, he was sure of it, but he didn’t know what question he needed to ask to get at it.

“But no one would trust a Ministry with You-Know-Who running it,” said Hermione.

“Not openly,” Mr. Weasley said. “But You-Know-Who operates in a good deal of secrecy. He hexes, he jinxes, he blackmails. He has others do his dirty work for him. He does not need to be out in the open. He does not need to be visible to get what he wants.”

There was another pregnant pause, and when no one volunteered information, Harry searched for the right question to get him the answers he needed.

“You said recruiting was just one thing Voldemort was up to,” Harry said. “What else is he after?”

“Something… he can only get by stealth,” James said.

Harry watched Lily’s hand slide over James’s and squeeze it tightly. He couldn’t tell if she was asking him to stop talking, or simply trying to lend support.

“I don’t understand,” said Neville.

“Something he didn’t have last time,” Sirius said. “Something to make him more powerful —”

“No.” Mrs. Weasley’s voice was sharp and firm. Harry hadn’t even heard her return from putting Ginny to bed, but sure enough, she and Mr. Longbottom were standing in the kitchen doorway. “No more. You’re not Order members, and you know far more than you ought to already. To bed, all of you.”

Harry waited for someone to tell Mrs. Weasley that she had no right to tell them how to parent their children, but no one said anything.

“Mum, please,” begged Fred and George.

“I said enough! Upstairs, now.”

Harry looked to his parents for help, but James only smiled sadly at him.

“It’s late, Snitch,” he said. “You should sleep.”

Harry had half a mind to stomp upstairs as furiously as Ginny had and wake the house. It was the only thing he could think of that would be as loud as he felt he needed to be right now. “You promised you’d tell me everything —”
“We promised we’d tell you what we could,” said Lily. There was a warning in her tone that Harry chose to ignore.

“You promised no more secrets. You promised you’d tell me things because maybe I could help! I dueled Voldemort, just like you did, Mum. I can help — I want to help. This isn’t fair!”

“Don’t raise your voice at your mother,” James said. His voice was stern, but his face betrayed his surprise.

Harry was, on some level, surprised, too. Yelling was not something that happened in their house, not unless Sirius instigated it. He’d never argued with his parents, not like this. But he also wasn’t about to back down.

“You can’t promise me answers, then stop answering questions when it’s convenient for you.”

“We certainly can.” Lily’s voice was sharp now, all warnings gone. She did not raise her voice, but Harry could tell she was furious with him by the way she clipped her words and the cold glint in her green eyes. They looked exactly how Harry imagined his own looked right now. “We are your parents, you’re underage, and we have every right to decide what’s best for you. That’s our job.”

“So that’s it, then? You’d rather lie to me? Make promises you’ve never planned on keeping?”

These words obviously hurt James and Lily, and Harry felt a deep satisfaction watching them wrestle with that hurt. A small part of him wondered what he was doing, and he felt something that was better described as a bad taste in his mouth than as a particular feeling. He was angry with his parents, yes, but he still loved them. His head throbbed, and he considered the benefits of quitting now and going to sleep, but he only tightened his jaw against the pain.

“Perhaps,” Remus began, when James and Lily offered no further defense of their decision, “it would be best to continue this conversation in the morning, when we’re rested.”

When Lily brushed her hand against the corner of her eye, and Harry realized she was doing her best not to cry, his anger finally deflated. He was still bitter and hurt, but it no longer felt like it was going to eat him alive if he didn’t get the answers he wanted.

“I think sleep would be best,” Mr. Longbottom said quietly.

Someone helped Harry stand, and he realized when they got to the kitchen door, it was Cedric guiding him. Cedric kept a hand on his elbow all the way up the stairs to his room. It was a small gesture, but it let Harry know he was not alone, and that, too, helped temper the bitter monster that threatened to eat him alive.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated.
They couldn't speak on the stairs, not without risking waking the portraits, or earning themselves a scolding from Mrs. Weasley as she watched each party enter their bedrooms. Hermione went into the room she shared with Ginny; Ron, Harry, and Neville were across the hall; and Fred, George, and Cedric were up another flight of stairs.

As soon as Neville had closed the door, Ron whispered, “Well, what do you reckon?”

Harry shrugged and dug into his trunk for his pajamas. “They didn’t say anything, did they?”

“They told us lots,” said Neville.

Ron snorted. “Just what we could’ve guessed, or had already worked out with the Extendables.”

He fed the owls before climbing into his bed.

“All they really said was that they’re trying to stop people from joining Vol—”

Ron and Neville both took in sharp breaths.

“— demort,” Harry finished with a frown. “When are you going to start using his name? Mum, Sirius, and Lupin do.”

“You dad doesn’t,” said Neville as he got up and bolted the door. “My dad doesn’t either.” He
turned the lights out.

“We could’ve figured they’re trying to tell people he’s back,” said Ron. “And stopping people from joining up. The only new bit was —”

There was a sharp crack, and Ron yelped.

“Keep your voice down, or Mum’ll be back up here.”

“You two just Apparated on my knees!”

“Yeah, well, it’s harder in the dark.”

Harry, though he’d already removed his glasses, could see the vague shapes of Fred and George, illuminated by the nearly-full moon.

“So what do you think?” George, or maybe Fred, asked. It was hard enough to tell them apart in the daylight, let alone in the moonlight when Harry’s glasses were resting on his bedside table.

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Mum stopped them before we could hear the good bits.”

“What do you think he’s after?” asked Fred, or maybe George.

“I don’t want to know,” Neville said. “It must be scary if You-Know-Who is after it.”

“Of course it’s scary, otherwise they’d tell us.” Harry didn’t mean to be patronizing, but Neville could be fairly simple at times.

“Maybe it’s some kind of spell,” suggested Fred or George.

“He has spells to bring himself back from the dead,” Harry said, and tried not to shiver at the thought. “What else could he possibly need?”

“Maybe some kind of weapon,” suggested Ron.

Harry tried to think what Voldemort would need a weapon for when he already had his wand and the Unforgivable Curses, which allowed him to kill and torture with ease. Nothing in particular came to mind, but they didn’t really have much to go on.

“Where do you think it is?” asked Neville.

“I’d bet Dumbledore has it,” said George or Fred.

“Probably at Hogwarts,” agreed Fred or George.

“I bet —” Ron started, but one of the twins shushed him.

There were footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Mum” the twins whispered, and Disapparated with a crack.

Harry, Ron, and Neville lay still in their beds, listening to Mrs. Weasley’s footsteps climb the stairs, boards creaking beneath her feet where she paused and listened. When she had gone, the house continued to creak, though a little more quietly. Ron’s quiet, but heavy breathing could be heard after a few moments.
Harry was used to an old house that settled during the night, but his mind was turning too quickly to fall asleep. If whatever Voldemort was after was hidden at Hogwarts, that would explain why his parents were so reluctant to let him go back to school. But what could it be?

He wondered if Cedric was lying awake, thinking about what they’d heard tonight. Or maybe he was lying awake because he didn’t want to fall into nightmares. Harry considered the risks of slipping upstairs to talk to Cedric, but there were several adults who might catch him and send him back to bed. He could use his Invisibility Cloak, safely tucked in his trunk. But then he’d have to explain to Fred and George why he was there, and he and Cedric wouldn’t be able to have a private conversation. Even if they did find a place to talk, where they wouldn’t be found by parents, there was no guarantee that Fred and George would leave the Extendable Ears out of the equation.

Neville’s snores started softly and steadily increased in volume. Harry regretted lying awake thinking. Sure, his nightmares were waiting for him, but he could at least get a little sleep despite them. Now he wasn’t sure he would get any.

But he underestimated his exhaustion, brought on by many sleepless nights, a very long flight across England, and an unprecedented fight with his parents. Within moments of closing his eyes, he drifted into a fitful sleep, interrupted only twice by nightmares of a graveyard filled with black-cloaked wizards, and each time he was lulled back to sleep by the steady sounds of his friends’ breathing.

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When Harry woke up that morning, some of his anger had been rubbed smooth, but not all of it. He went down to breakfast with Ron and Neville, all of them careful not to wake the portraits. Hermione and Ginny were already seated at the table with plates of toast and eggs, but Fred, George, and Cedric were nowhere to be found.

“Late risers as usual,” Molly Weasley huffed, reminding Harry strangely of Mellie. “Well, hurry up and eat,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of work to do today.”

“Work?” Harry asked as Mrs. Weasley disappeared upstairs.

“Cleaning,” Neville said, and took a large bite of his breakfast.

The way Neville said it made it sound like an incredibly daunting task, more like taming a Blast-Ended Skrewt than polishing some silver.

Mrs. Weasley ushered in a sleepy trio, who each sat down at the table with irritable groans. Harry wanted to ask Cedric several different questions, about how he was sleeping and about everything the Order had told them last night, but he didn’t dare under the watchful eye of Mrs. Weasley.

Instead, as Harry finished his toast, he asked Mrs. Weasley, “Where are my Mum and Dad?” He didn’t forget they’d promised to continue last night’s conversation this morning.

“Your Mum left early this morning with Mr. Shacklebolt. Your father and Sirius already had their breakfast and are in the drawing room, repairing a set of shredded curtains. What happened to those curtains, I’ll never guess, but they were having quite the laugh over it.”

She still sounded furious, like her anger from last night hadn’t ebbed at all, and she had focused it largely on James and Sirius. As frustrated as Harry was with his parents, at least they were telling him some things, unlike Mrs. Weasley, who wanted them to know absolutely nothing.

She hovered while they ate breakfast, preventing any real conversation from occurring under her
watchful eye. When they’d finally finished, their dishes were swept up by a flick of her wand, and they were led from the kitchen to the drawing room. Harry thought he heard Fred grumble to George, “She uses her wand for everything,” but he couldn’t be sure.

When they reached the drawing room, they found a rather loud argument already reaching its peak. James was lounging on the couch, hand covering a half-smile, while the Black brothers were engaged in a shouting match that even Mrs. Weasley might have trouble keeping up with.

“STOP IT--DAMMIT, SIRIUS, I SAID IT WAS SILVER.”

“IT’S A BIT OF EMBROIDERY, NOT A BLOODY CONTRACT —”

“IT’S THE PRINCIPLE — YOU ALWAYS DO THIS!”

“‘ALWAYS’? WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?”

“FIRST THE CHINA, THE GOBELTS — I’M SORRY YOU DON’T LIKE IT, BUT THIS IS OUR HOUSE —”

“OUR HOUSE? WHO —”

“ENOUGH!” Mrs. Weasley shouted. “Everyday, it’s the same fight with the two of you! Both of you, out! You’re no help at all!” She pointed her finger at the door, as if she expected Sirius and Regulus to follow her orders like she was their mother. They didn’t move, but they paused their argument long enough for Mrs. Weasley to turn her temper on James.

“And you! Sitting there laughing, encouraging them —”

“Come off it, Molly,” James said, still struggling to hide a smile, “they don’t need my encouragement —”

“Then don’t give it to them!” She pointed her wand at the curtains and said, “Reparo!” and the holes in the black curtains were mended with silver snakes, twisting their way through the thick, black fabric.

Sirius glared at the fabric so sourly, Harry was sure the snakes would only last until Mrs. Weasley and Regulus had their backs turned.

“Regulus, why don’t you find that house-elf and make yourselves useful somewhere away from Sirius, or we’ll never get any work done.”

“It’s fine,” Sirius said through gritted teeth. “I’ll just see myself out.”

“And go where?” James asked, “Our house is all shut up. Take your temper out on that cabinet, instead.” James nodded at the display cabinet, containing what looked to Harry like a large collection of dark objects, ranging from strange creature claws to a crystal bottle full of a dark, red, blood-like substance.

“If you’re going to go through that cabinet,” Regulus said, “I’m not leaving this room.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “It’s a cabinet of expensive dark objects, not a collection of magical history.”

“Grandfather’s Order of Merlin First Class is right there —”

“Which he got for what? Donating a lot of money to the Ministry —”
“If you bothered to care at all, you’d know it was because he helped pass a law that protected Britain from giants —”

“By making sure money got exchanged in the right places, no doubt.”

“Stop it!” Mrs. Weasley said. “I’ve had enough of you two! Sirius, I expect the kitchen spotless by the time I get down there to prepare lunch. Regulus, you and Kreacher can finish up the parlor. James and I will handle this cabinet.”

“Molly,” James said, a bit of a plea in his voice, “don’t put me in the middle of them. If what’s kept is up to me —”

But Molly’s eyes flashed dangerously, and James deflated with a very long sigh.

“Come on, lads, you heard her.”

Regulus and Sirius eyed each other, Sirius’s face a picture of perfect fury and heavy breathing, while Regulus looked more like a picturesque statue, portraying quiet rage. But both finally gave in, under the combined pressure of James and Molly.

Sirius stormed out of the room and down to the kitchens. Regulus swept out of the room with a polite, “Good morning,” the children, and called for Kreacher once he was in the hall.

“This is what just about every morning is like,” Ron whispered to Harry.

“And afternoon,” Neville added quietly.

“And evening,” Ginny said with a half-laugh.

Fred and George yawned loudly and took a seat next to the cabinet.

“What happened to the curtains in the first place, anyway?” asked George.

“A werewolf ran into them,” James said. “Knocked loose some doxies, and, well, can’t say the doxies or the curtains survived.”

Fred, George, and Ginny all laughed, despite the sharp glare of their mother as she unlocked the cabinet.

Harry never knew cleaning could be so exhausting. He’d helped his parents clean the house on weekends, but that had been a lot of dusting, changing linens, and polishing furniture. This was going through a cabinet item by item and hoping it didn’t kill any of them. There were a couple of close calls: a strange object that looked like a pair of tweezers, but with many legs, that scurried up Hermione’s arm like a spider and tried to puncture her neck before James smashed it with a very thick book titled, Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy by Cantankerous Nott; a strange box that, once opened, played a lullaby that made everyone rather drowsy until Ginny had the sense to slam it shut; and a silver snuffbox that bit Harry’s hand and coated it in a thick, crusty skin, like a grotesque glove.

James examined Harry’s arm with a frown. “Wartcap powder. Sirius should be able to set that right, no problem.”

James got up to walk Harry down to the kitchen. In the hallway, careful to keep his voice low so it wouldn’t wake the portraits, Harry asked, “Dad, you said we could finish talking about everything today.”
“I did.”

“Can’t we talk about it now?”

“I’d like to wait until your mother gets home, but if she isn’t back by dinner, sure, we’ll talk about it.”

Harry was surprised by how easily that conversation went, and he felt lighter than he had in weeks.

Then James said, “You owe her an apology.”

“For what?” Harry felt furious all of a sudden. “I didn’t say anything wrong.”

James pressed his lips together tightly and paused at the door to the kitchen. “You didn’t say anything untrue, but you didn’t say anything kindly. You owe your mother a fair bit of respect.”

Harry did not have much opportunity to say anything more as James pushed his way into the kitchen, where they found Sirius putting the last of the dishes into the cabinet.

“Did I catch you just before you were about to Vanish the crest off the china?” James asked. His voice was cheery, all evidence of his conversation with Harry gone.

Sirius still looked grumpy, but not quite as furious as he had been. “Was planning on starting with the silver, but yeah.”

“Don’t set Regulus and Molly off again just for the sake of it,” James said. “This house can’t take much more of your shouting. It’ll collapse on top of us all.”

“Good. It deserves to be rubble.”

James shook his head. “Just fix Harry’s arm, then come help us in the drawing room.”

Harry held his hand up to Sirius who smiled grimly at it.

“Wartcap powder? Surprised it wasn’t something worse.” Sirius tapped his wand against Harry’s hand, and just like that it was back to normal.

“Thanks,” Harry said, a little awed. “You should teach me healing spells sometime.”

“Get an Outstanding in your Charms and Transfiguration O.W.L.s and you have a deal. But first, let’s finish binning the contents of that cabinet.”

In the end, they didn’t bin everything. James insisted they hold onto the Order of Merlin First Class award, a ring with the Black family crest in it, a few boxes that did not bite and did not have anything dangerous inside, and a coiled snakeskin. Sirius said the snakeskin creeped him out and they ought to get rid of it, but James said it wasn’t dangerous or valuable, meaning it probably had sentimental value, and Regulus would want to keep it.

Just as they finished, there was a loud knock at the door, and portraits began shrieking.

“I keep telling them not to knock,” Sirius said with a groan. “Just walk in, or send a Patronus if you have to,” he grumbled and left the room.

Once the portraits were quiet, they heard Kingsley's deep voice drift down the hall, “Hestia’s just
relieved me, so she’s got Moody’s cloak now. Thought I’d leave a report for Dumbledore —”

“Lunch, I think,” Molly said, rather loudly, and Harry’s stomach grumbled. Cleaning had proved to be both exhausting and hunger-inducing. “James, I could use a hand in the kitchen.”

If James thought it odd Molly was asking him for help, he didn’t say anything about it, and simply followed her. Harry certainly found it odd, especially after he and Sirius had made such a display of their uselessness the night before. He looked to Ron and Hermione, expecting to see his puzzled expression mirrored on their faces, but instead he caught looks of annoyance.

As Molly closed the door to the drawing room, Ron said, “She thinks your dad’ll tell us stuff she doesn’t want us to hear.”

George pulled an Extendable Ear from his pocket and slipped one end under the door. A bag of black powder slipped out of his pocket, and Fred hastily scooped it up.

“Did you nick some of that wartcap powder?” Harry asked, and rubbed his crust-free hand.

“Experimenting with it for Skivving Snackboxes,” Fred whispered. “Pipe down or we won’t be able to hear anything.”

“What are Skivving Snackboxes?” Harry whispered to Ron and Hermione.

“Their new product for Wizard Wheezes,” Ron said. “It’s like chews, and you take a bite of one end, get sick and sent to the nurse, then you take the other and it makes you better.”

“I can’t believe they’re —”

“Sh!” Fred and George both said, effectively silencing Hermione’s protest.

While Fred and George listened at the door, and Ginny and Neville pulled Puck out from beneath the rattling writing desk, Cedric took a seat on the couch and closed his eyes, looking like he was about to settle in for a nap. Harry felt a bit like he wanted to do the same.

When it seemed Ron and Hermione were sufficiently distracted by Hermione showing Ron how to translate the runes on one of the old silver boxes — a discussion that had Hermione seriously engrossed and Ron a little dazed, but he made no effort to find another interest — Harry went and sat next to Cedric.

He meant to ask if Cedric was alright, but the question died in his mouth. He already knew the answer, perhaps better than anyone else could. Instead it was Cedric who spoke first, without even opening his eyes.

“Thanks for not saying anything in front of my Mum last night.”

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t quite sure what he had wisely left unsaid, but he thought he ought to just accept the gratitude. “Is everything alright with your Mum?”

Cedric finally opened his eyes, and though he kept his gaze on the ceiling, the haunted look in Cedric’s usually bright eyes reminded Harry of when his father had come home from spending a week at the Ministry fighting for Remus’s freedom.

“My Mum is… well, she and my father are rather light-hearted about most things, if you hadn’t noticed. She means well, but she worries, and she tries to fix things. And if she can’t fix it…. I just don’t want her to worry too much.”
It took Harry a moment to work out the meaning in Cedric’s words. “You’re lying to her. You’ve told her you’re fine when you’re not.”

“You mean you’ve never lied to your parents before?” When Harry didn’t answer, Cedric said, “She can’t help, and I don’t want to bother her with something she can’t help. It’d only make this whole thing more difficult for her.”

Harry remembered the conversation he’d overheard his father and Remus have, and how ever since, he’d tried to keep his own nightmares quiet, so as not to worry his parents. But his parents weren’t fooled, and he doubted they ever would be. He was surprised Cedric’s mum was.

Then again, Harry’s parents had done this before. They’d fought with the Order of the Phoenix against Voldemort the last time. Cedric’s parents might not have been as closely involved. They might not have a way of understanding just how terrifying the war was, not the way Harry’s parents did.

He remembered how jovial Amos Diggory had been throughout dinner and the conversation following. It hadn’t been tempered by that fear James and Lily had expressed. Was that because Cedric was older than Harry? Was it because Mr. Diggory didn’t care as much as Harry’s parents did? Or was it something else that his parents knew to fear, and the Diggorys did not?

“My Mum doesn’t want me to fight anymore than your parents do,” Cedric said, “even though I offered to be helpful at the beginning of the summer. She wants to protect me, so I’ll let her believe she is. It’s the least I can really do for them.”

Harry’s parents had said over and over, “It’s our job to protect you,” and Harry thought Cedric’s perspective on what that meant was a little twisted. It wasn’t really protecting, was it, when you simply lied to your parents and told them you were fine?

“She’ll find out,” Harry said. “Parents always do.”

Cedric smiled. “Do they?”

In Harry’s experience, yes, but maybe Mrs. Diggory wasn’t as clever as Lily Potter.

George yanked on the Extendable Ear and slipped it into his pocket just as the door opened. Mrs. Weasley eyed them all suspiciously, but seemed satisfied they weren’t huddled together whispering about things they shouldn’t know.

“Lunch is ready,” she said, and brought in a tray of sandwiches.

After everyone had thanked her and was happily scarfing down her food, Harry asked, “Did my mother come back with Mr. Shacklebolt?”

“No, she’ll be back later,” Mrs. Weasley said, and offered no explanation about what Lily might be up to.

As they finished eating, Ginny began to gather plates and said, “I can take these to the kitchen for you, Mum.”

“Oh, no thank you, though it’s sweet of you to offer.” Mrs. Weasley took the plates from Ginny. “When I get back we’ll see if we can do anything about that,” and she nodded at the tapestry on the wall.

As soon as she was gone, Fred said, “Nice try, Ginny.”
“What?” asked Neville.

“I’ll bet anything Mr. Potter, Sirius, and Shacklebolt are down there talking Order business.”

“Did you get anything on the Ears?” Hermione asked.

“Only that Shacklebolt came back from some sort of watch duty. Said he couldn’t stay long, had to get back to the Ministry.” George rested his hands behind his head. “Wonder what they’re guarding.”

The door opened, and they all tried to make themselves look busy, though unnecessarily. It wasn’t Mrs. Weasley that walked in, but Regulus Black. Behind him trailed the oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen, older than Mellie, even, at least in looks. Its wrinkly skin hung off its skeletal frame in thick folds, and it had large white tufts of hair growing out of its enormous ears. Its snout was long, and hung almost like an elephant trunk. The house-elf slunk behind Regulus, eyes on the floor, mumbling something Harry couldn’t quite make out.

Regulus eyed the cabinet. Harry couldn’t tell if Regulus was displeased with how much they’d thrown out or pleased with what they’d decided to keep.

“Seems like you’ve about finished up in here,” Regulus said. As he did, the writing desk shook violently.

“Save for a boggart,” said Ginny.

“Mum wants a go at that tapestry,” George said.

“Will you fight her over it?” Fred asked. He sounded hopeful.

Regulus looked over the tapestry with his usually unreadable expression. “I’d bet there’s a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of it. Mrs. Weasley’s welcome to wrestle it off the wall, but it’s been there for seven centuries. I think it has a bit more right to be there than Sirius or your mother would like to believe.”

Though there was no bitterness in Regulus’s voice, Harry wondered how frustrated Regulus was with the deep-cleaning they were doing of the house. His shouting match with Sirius was the most expression Harry had ever seen from Regulus, and he wondered if he’d ever see it again. From what Ron, Ginny, and Neville had said, he supposed he’d get to see it fairly often.

“Kreacher,” Regulus said, “polish that cabinet and dust this room, but don’t touch the writing desk. The rest of you, let’s start working on a different room.”

Kreacher bowed low, “Of course, Master Regulus, Kreacher lives to serve the noble house of Black.”

“Mrs. Weasley said—” Neville began carefully, but Regulus cut him off.

“Your mother can take care of the boggart if she wishes, but the rest of that room is perfectly free of dark objects.”

“We could take care of the boggart,” Ron said. “We’ve done it before.”

Harry had fought a boggart more than once, but his nightmares leapt to the front of his mind and he thought he wasn’t quite ready to try again.
Regulus looked over the group of young witches and wizards with a curious expression. “I imagine you’re all very talented for your age.”

As Regulus held the door open for them, Hermione asked, “Are you sure it’s alright to give Kreacher so much to do? He’s very old.” She looked worriedly at the house-elf. “Don’t you think it’d be better to set him free?”

“He’s happier with work to do,” Regulus said. “Trust me, no one knows Kreacher better than I do. Sirius will happily tell you I had no better friends than house-elves as a boy. I think we’re better served cleaning out the dining room. Mrs. Diggory said she saw an infestation of spiders that needed tackling.”

As Ron went deathly pale, the doorbell rang throughout the house, and the portraits started up again. Regulus frowned ever so slightly and went to quiet the house.

“Fat lot of good he is,” Fred grumbled.

“Cleaning out the spiders,” George snorted. “He’ll spend his time watching Kreacher clean the drawing room and turn up when all the work is done, just like he did today.”

“Mrs. Weasley did tell him to stay out of the drawing room,” said Neville.

“I think he gets in his fights with Sirius just so he doesn’t have to clean,” said Ginny.

Harry was about to protest that he thought Regulus and Sirius didn’t truly need prompting or excuses to fight, but he realized that level of deviousness sounded indeed like Regulus Black.

“Who’s at the door?” Cedric asked, as Hermione peered down the hallway.

“Mundungus Fletcher,” she said, “with a large stack of cauldrons.”

“Cauldrons?” asked Ron. “What does the Order need cauldrons for —”

“You can kindly store your stolen goods elsewhere,” Regulus said, surprisingly loudly. He wasn’t quite yelling, not like he had at Sirius, but it seemed Mundungus was working on his temper just as well. “This is not a waystation for criminal activity. As if there’s not enough going on in this house to risk attention from the authorities. Ah, perfect, Kingsley can see you out.”

“Didn’t know he could yell at anyone other than Sirius like that,” Fred said with a grin.

“Nice to know the man has a bit of personality,” George laughed.

Sirius came around the corner and smiled at them. “Enjoying the show from here?”

“Did Kingsley finish leaving his report?” Harry asked.

“He did.” Sirius tried and failed to suppress a smile, but he didn’t offer them any more information about Kingsley. “Ready to finish up the drawing room?”

“Mr. Black already asked Kreacher to clean the drawing room,” Hermione said.

“What, and just leave that ugly old tapestry hanging? No reason to keep that decrepit thing in this house any longer. I’ll burn it off the wall if I have to.” Sirius stared into the drawing room like he might be tempted to burn the entire room down. “It’s safe for you lot to go into the kitchen without angering Molly, if that’s what you’re waiting for.”
Harry thought the kitchen, where James and Mrs. Weasley probably were, was safer than the
drawing room, where Regulus and Sirius were bound to get into another fight. Everyone headed
down to the kitchen, except Fred, George, and Ginny, who lingered, like they found the
approaching fight far more entertaining.

No one had to wait long for the fight, however. As soon as Regulus had seen Mundungus off the
premises, he went to check on Kreacher, and he and Sirius were once again at full volume,
bickering about the tapestry, and the house was shrieking with them.

Eventually, the brothers had quieted the house and stowed their argument away for another day.
Everyone went down to the kitchen, where Mrs. Weasley happily put them to work preparing
dinner.

“How many will be here tonight?” Harry asked.

Mrs. Weasley looked him over, searching for any sort of hidden meaning to his question, like a
number might give him more information than she wanted him to have, before finally saying,
“About twenty.”

“Is it always this full?”

“Eight kids,” James said, “plus everyone’s parents, and Remus is living here, and Molly’s brothers
often stay for meals, and Tonks likes to drop in — it’s usually a pretty full house.”

It took them most of the afternoon to prepare dinner. Cooking for twenty was a rather time-
consuming process. Tonks, the Longbottoms, the Prewetts, the Diggorys, and Arthur Weasley all
arrived in succession as they left work at the Ministry. Lily was nearly late for the meal, arriving
just as they were setting food on the table. She had dirt on her robes, on her face, and in her hair, all
of which James quickly cleaned with a tap of his wand before giving her a quick kiss.

Harry opened his mouth to ask his parents what had happened, and could they finally finish last
night’s conversation, but his father’s quick glance at him said to wait, so Harry did.

Dinner was as loud and chaotic as it had been the night before. Tonks did her best impressions for
everyone, including one that looked and sounded suspiciously like a pink-haired version of Snape.
Remus and Sirius laughed the loudest at that one. The Prewett brothers engaged in a silent practice
duel, casting hexes at each other across the table, until one bounced off a shield and struck Neville
in the face, turning his head into a pumpkin. Alice Longbottom laughed, and so did Neville. Frank
was the only one who looked anxious as Remus turned Neville back to normal. Mr. Diggory and
James set up a game of flick-Quidditch, comprised of taking a crumpled piece of parchment and
flicking it into a circle made by the opponent’s hands. Lily and Regulus carried on a quiet
conversation at their end of the table that Harry wished he had Extendable Ears to hear, but he was
squished between Fred and George, who were using their peas as Bludgers, attempting to knock
Mr. Diggory’s and James’s makeshift Quaffle out of the air as they passed it back and forth, and
were making too much ruckus for Harry to hear anything.

There was no dessert that night, and Harry was a little bit grateful. He’d eaten so much the night
before that he wasn’t sure he had room for another full feast.

James and Remus started clearing dishes, and Harry opened his mouth to demand that his parents
finally tell him what was happening, but Lily passed behind him and squeezed his shoulder. She
leaned down to kiss his cheek and said, “We’ll talk somewhere more private, alright?”

Harry buried his frustration as Lily ruffled his hair. It wasn’t until the dishes were done, Remus
was showing Tonks out, and everyone was headed upstairs that James and Lily gestured for Harry to follow them into their room.

Their room was actually Sirius Black’s room, covered in Gryffindor banners and posters of motorcycles with women in bikinis lying on top of them, looking like they weren’t particularly interested in riding the bikes. Harry knew they had to be Muggle posters, because they didn’t move like wizarding posters did.

“Charming, isn’t it?” Lily said with a wry smile as Harry eyed the decorations. “But the house is just about full. With everyone living here, the only empty room is the master. Only Sirius and Regulus are allowed in there, and neither one wants to take it.”

“It looks like Sirius hasn’t redecorated since he was my age,” said Harry.

“That’s about when he left home,” James said. “Just before our sixth year, I think.”

“I tried redecorating,” Lily said, “but he’s got Permanent Sticking Charms on the back of all of it. Rather unnerving sleeping with them in here.”

“I don’t mind it,” said James. “Kidding, kidding,” he said quickly, off of Lily’s glare.

Lily sat down on the edge of the bed and motioned for Harry to join her.

“I know you have lots of questions left,” Lily said, “and your father and I… we want to tell you as much as we can. But there are some things we really can’t tell you. It’s for your safety and the safety of the Order.”

“You won’t tell me what it is that Voldemort’s after?”

Lily bit down on her lower lip and looked up at James.

James shook his head. “Sorry, Snitch. We can’t do that.”

“Why not? I could help — I want to help!”

Lily put her hand over Harry’s, but he pulled away.

“Harry,” she said slowly, “I know this isn’t easy for you. It isn’t easy for us either.”

“Can you tell me what you were doing all day?” Harry didn’t mean to snap at her, but he couldn’t help it.

“Yes,” and Lily looked relieved she could answer. “I spent the day spying on Avery. I didn’t learn much, other than there’s better fertilizer they could put in their rose garden. But I’m not about to recommend them any.”

“Why are you spying on Avery?”

“We do a lot of spying on known Death Eaters,” James said. “But you can’t go telling anyone,” James said. “You-Know-Who is operating in the greatest secrecy, and we don’t want his operatives knowing what we’re up to, anymore than he wants us knowing what he’s up to.”

“Doesn’t that make it hard to know who to trust?”

“It does.” Lily let out a heavy sigh. “Which is why the Ministry’s only making things difficult by denying Voldemort’s return.”
I don’t understand why they won’t just believe Dumbledore. You said Fudge thinks Dumbledore wants power, but what about the rest of the Ministry? They’ve got to have some sense.”

James ran a hand through his hair. “It’s hard to explain what the war was like. It was, well, terrifying. Your mum and I grew up in a pretty dark time. You could come home at night and expect to see the Dark Mark over your house, just because your dad gave a loud pro-Muggle-born speech in front of the Ministry, or maybe some dark wizards tracked down your Muggle family and killed them while you were at school.”

“That didn’t happen to either of you, though, right?” Harry asked. “You always said my grandparents died of dragon pox, or a Muggle sickness.”

“That’s true,” Lily said, “but it didn’t change how terrified we were that it could have happened. And it did happen to some of our friends.”

“You and Cedric could have died this summer,” James said, “and your mother and I just want to keep that from happening. We want you safe as long as possible.”

Harry thought long and hard about those words. They weren’t easy for him to swallow. Over and over, his parents promised to protect him, and yes, they’d done their best, but surely even they saw they’d reached a point where maybe it was time for Harry to fight. He was already facing things they couldn’t protect him from. Wasn’t it time they let him try to protect himself?

He knew what they’d say, though. They’d tell him he had to wait until he was of age. So he picked a different question, a question he didn’t already know the answer to.

“Why are we using Sirius’s house? He hates it here, and he’s always fighting with Regulus, and this place is full of so much dangerous stuff.”

“It’s a really convenient safe house,” James said. “The Black family hated Muggles, and disliked the Ministry who could, on occasion, rule in favor of Muggleborns, so there are tons of protections on this place. More than our own house. It’s Unplottable, and for generations the Trace has been undetectable here. It’s ideal for Order headquarters. The Ministry can’t find us, and they’d never suspect we’re using a house with this history. The downside is all the cleaning, but it seems a fair trade off.”

“So I could be using magic to clean?” Harry asked.

“Only if you want Mrs. Weasley taking your wand,” James laughed. “Besides, you need to be on your best magical behavior this week.”

He didn’t say the words, “Your trial is coming up,” and Harry was grateful.

“What else do you want to know?” Lily asked. She reached a hand to brush his bangs out of his eyes, and Harry didn’t move away from her.

“I guess that’s about all I can ask, isn’t it?” He wanted to help. He wanted to fight. He wanted to know what Voldemort was after, but he’d been told all of those were off limits. “Well, I do want to know what Remus will do in a few days, if we’re all staying in this house, and people are coming and going.”

“We still have the cottage in Hogsmeade,” James said. “Sirius and I’ll go with him.”

“You’re so good to worry about Remus,” Lily said and kissed his forehead. “We just want you, for the next couple years, to worry about you, and let us worry about everything else.”
It seemed to Harry, though, that was the most unreasonable thing his parents had ever asked him to do. He’d always worried about Remus, because that was what his parents did. He’d worried about Hagrid when Hagrid had adopted a baby dragon. He’d worried about Hermione when she’d been petrified by the monster hiding in the Chamber of Secrets. He’d worried about Sirius when Regulus Black had escaped from Azkaban. He worried about others because his parents had taught him to care about others, and now they were asking him not to. This, even more than the secrets, made Harry angry.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll let you go to bed then.”

Lily startled at the sudden change in his behavior. She looked up at him as he stood, eyes both hurt and confused. Harry belatedly remembered his father’s admonishment to be more polite.

James cleared his throat, both a reminder and a warning, but Harry ignored him and stormed out of the room.

Harry was both disappointed and relieved to not see much of his parents over the next week. Lily was often gone for Order business. James was gone for a few days with Remus and Sirius to the cottage in Hogsmeade. The house was quieter with James gone — or rather, the house was quieter with Sirius gone. Regulus had terse exchanges with Mrs. Weasley over some items in the house, but it was nothing like the shouting matches he would get into with Sirius.

They cleaned the spiders out of the dining room while Ron made himself a cup of tea for an hour and a half. Harry didn’t blame him. The spiders were about as large as saucers, and if Harry hadn’t already survived a swarm of Acromantula, he might’ve joined Ron for that lengthy cup of tea. There was one afternoon where Tonks helped them remove a murderous ghoul from an upstairs toilet. When James and Remus returned, they went to work repairing a grandfather clock that launched heavy bolts at whoever decided to walk past it. The Prewett brothers caused a bit more trouble than they fixed by accidentally charming one of the bookshelves in the library to fall over if anyone got too close. Regulus was absent for most of the cleaning, whether he was with Kreacher or hiding in his room, but he always turned up in time to make sure Molly or Sirius wasn’t about to throw something valuable to the Black family’s history out.

Harry went to bed each night properly tuckered out by all the cleaning Mrs. Weasley had them doing. That didn’t stop his nightmares, however. He dreamed of the graveyard, of Cedric, of Regulus, of Barty Crouch, of Voldemort. They were joined by imagined images of his upcoming Ministry trial, of Fudge pronouncing him expelled from Hogwarts, and Harry’s wand snapped into two pieces.

He woke up in the middle of the night, comforted by Neville’s snores, knowing he at least hadn’t woken Neville. It was harder to know if he woke Ron or not.

At dinner on Wednesday night, his father said, “Your mum and I made sure your best Muggle clothes are ironed, for going to the Ministry tomorrow.”

“Make sure you comb your hair as best you can,” Lily said. “You’ll want to look your best.”

“Are we walking there?” Harry asked. He hoped he sounded unconcerned, though he was pretty sure the delicious chops Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom had made had suddenly been Transfigured into lead in his stomach.

“Taking the Tube,” Sirius said. “Best to arrive in the most non-magical fashion, isn’t it?”

“Are you all coming?”
“We’ll all come with you as far as we can,” Remus promised.

Harry, for all the independence and trust he had demanded from his parents, was grateful they were all going to support him, even if he hadn’t been particularly kind to his parents, and still hadn’t apologized for making his mother cry. He told himself he’d apologize as soon as he got the chance, as soon as he didn’t feel like everyone at the table was staring at him.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
When Harry woke the next morning, the sky was a dull gray, but the sun had not yet risen. He stared out at the hazy sky, trying to breakdown the overwhelming prospect of the Ministry hearing. He needed to get dressed, eat breakfast, comb his hair, but the to-do list seemed to dim every time he focused on it, dwarfed by the all-consuming thought of the hearing, and the fear of some faceless Ministry official breaking his wand.

No, not faceless. His father had said Amelia Bones was going to be in charge of his hearing. She’d been to his birthday party when he’d turned eleven, but he couldn’t quite remember her face. He only remembered that she was Susan’s aunt, and that Voldemort had killed a lot of her family.

Did Amelia Bones believe what the Daily Prophet said about him, or would she take him seriously when he said he’d been attacked by dementors? Was she, like Fudge, too afraid to admit Voldemort had returned, or did she agree with Dumbledore?

Harry rubbed his forehead, though it didn’t really relieve the dull ache in his scar. He was starting to become used to the constant pain, like background noise he couldn’t get away from.

He put his glasses on, and the dim room came into focus. Ron was sprawled on his bed, fast asleep. Neville rolled over once, breathing unusually quiet. Harry considered asking if Neville was awake, but didn’t want to risk waking Ron or the owls. So he dressed silently in the clothes his mother had picked out last evening and slipped down the hall to the bathroom, where he washed his face and tried, unsuccessfully, to flatten his hair.

He went downstairs as quietly as he could. He expected the kitchen to be empty, except for maybe his parents, but it was surprisingly crowded. Mrs. Weasley was in her dressing gown with a cup of tea, and Mr. Weasley was beside her in his Ministry robes. Frank Longbottom was scooping eggs onto two plates. He passed one to his wife, and when he saw Harry, smiled, and gave Harry the second plate.
“Morning,” he said.

“Morning. Thanks.” Harry slipped into a seat next to his father.

Remus, Sirius, and Regulus were also all awake, and Tonks was seated at the table with them.

Tonks yawned and stammered out a good morning. “Sleep alright?”

“Yeah,” Harry lied. He avoided Remus’s raised eyebrows by staring at his breakfast.

When a long enough pause had passed, Remus asked Tonks, “What were you saying about Scrimgeour?”

Tonks yawned again. “Oh…. yeah… well, we need to be a bit more careful, he’s been asking Kingsley and me funny questions.”

James squeezed Harry’s shoulder once. “Eat something. I’m going to see if your mother’s ready.”

Harry was surprised Lily wasn’t already in the kitchen. It was James who was usually a late riser. As James went out the door, Mr. and Mrs. Diggory came in. Mr. Diggory began preparing tea, while Mrs. Diggory set to work getting them breakfast. Good mornings were exchanged all around. Mrs. Diggory patted Harry’s head encouragingly as she passed him with her toast.

It was strange, Harry thought, all these families living together in one house. It reminded him of a strange blend of his family, made up of a handful of unrelated people, and Ron’s family, with their massive size and constant chaos — which made sense, since between his family and Ron’s family, they made up more than half of the house’s occupants. He decided, though, that even if he was feeling anxious about his trial, this was not a bad place to be. There were so many people here, and all of them supported him in their own way.

“I’ll have to tell Dumbledore I can’t do night duty tomorrow. I’m just too tired.” Tonks yawned again, and Remus got up and poured her a second cup of coffee.

“I’ll see if I can cover you,” Mr. Weasley offered.

“Alright, Harry?” Sirius asked.

Harry shrugged and nibbled at his eggs.

“It’ll be over in a few hours,” Frank Longbottom said. “You’ll be clear soon.”

“You’ll be on the same floor as all of us,” Alice Longbottom said with a smile. “We’ll all be there rooting for you.”

“Amelia Bones is okay, Harry, really,” said Tonks. “She’s fair, and she’ll listen.”

“Be polite and stick to the facts,” said Regulus.

Harry nodded, remembering Regulus, too, had sat for a Ministry trial. Regulus, however, had gone to Azkaban. But Harry remembered, from viewing the trial through Dumbledore’s memories, that Regulus had not said anything at all in his defense, and had let Barty Crouch blame him for everything.

The door to the kitchen opened again, and James returned, Lily right behind him. She was fiddling with a Muggle purse, and Harry thought she looked as anxious as he felt. But when she looked up at him, she smiled confidently.
“Did you get enough to eat, Harry?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve hardly touched your food,” Mrs. Diggory said. “At least take some toast. You’ll feel better if you eat.”

Harry did not think he would feel better if he ate, but he was starting to see what Cedric meant about Mrs. Diggory wanting to fix things. He took toast from her without protest, and so did Lily.

“Thank you, Fiona,” Lily said. “But I think we’d better be off.”

Mr. Diggory checked the watch on his wrist. “Thought you said the trial was at nine. S’not yet six.”

“We’ll be going the Muggle way,” James said. “Seems more fitting than trying to all Apparate there.”

Harry, who had been on the London Tube a few times in his life, could not imagine it would take them three hours to get to the Ministry, but Remus and Sirius both stood.

“Stop by my office when you’re done,” Mr. Weasley said.

“We will,” Lily said. As Harry got up, she tried to flatten his hair. But it hadn’t lain flat in fifteen years, and it was not about to start now. Lily frowned at it, and then the five of them were off.

As they walked, there was none of the casual chatter that usually accompanied a walk with his family. Remus and Sirius walked side by side, two paces behind Harry. James and Lily walked two paces in front. Harry noticed they each kept their hands inside coats or pockets, presumably on their wands. It seemed oddly paranoid to Harry, like something Mad-Eye Moody might do. Perhaps for peacetime, it was unreasonable to walk around with your wand at the ready, but this wasn’t peacetime. Though Harry had known they were at war, and he was already suffering the horrors of nightmares and near-death situations, watching his parents walk through London like it was a battlefield of invisible enemies added a new reality to their situation. Even as they went underground and crammed into a train packed with Muggles, James, Lily, Remus, and Sirius remained alert. Sirius and Remus stationed themselves by the doors of the train, and James and Lily made sure to stay on either side of Harry. Lily continued her vain attempts to flatten Harry’s hair, and he didn’t protest.

Once off the train, James led the way back up into the open air and down several side streets. The crowds thinned as they walked, and Lily and Sirius seemed more jumpy with each step they took. Harry understood. Less Muggles meant a more likely attack. It seemed a strange way to look at London, in terms of battle strategy, but Harry found it coming more easily as they walked. Corners of buildings became places Death Eaters could be hiding, Dumpsters in an alley looked more like temporary bunkers to hide behind. Harry started to see what people meant by the phrase, “boggarts in every corner.” He didn’t like, though, that it suddenly applied to him.

They reached an alley of rather shabby looking offices and a dilapidated phone box, and Harry couldn’t imagine they were anywhere near the Ministry of Magic. Perhaps it really would take them three hours to arrive.

“Here we are,” James said, and opened the door to the phone booth. Harry looked at him for a moment before stepping inside. There wasn’t much space for more than one person, so he squeezed up against the wall for James to fit in beside him. Everyone else waited outside while
James turned the number dial.

“Alright, six… two… four… four again and… two again.”

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” a woman’s voice said. Harry wasn’t quite sure where it was coming from; she seemed to fill the whole booth. “Please state your name and business.”

James, though he was holding the telephone, did not speak into it. He said to the booth at large, “James Potter, escorting Harry Potter to his disciplinary hearing.”

“Thank you,” the woman said. “Visitors, please take your badges, and attach them to the front of your robes.”

Harry looked down at his Muggle clothes, wondering if he should’ve worn dress robes instead. Then something clicked in the machine and two badges fell into a small tray at the base of the telephone apparatus. They were both square and silver, one labeled, “Harry Potter, Disciplinary Hearing,” and the other labeled, “James Potter, parent escort.” Harry took them and handed his father’s over, then pinned his to his shirt.

The telephone box slid downwards. Harry watched Lily, Sirius, and Remus disappear as he and his father were swallowed into the earth. There was no light, only the woman’s voice, “Visitors to the Ministry are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium.”

The ground, finally, disappeared and the box was filled with a golden light, beginning at the bottom and climbing its way up as the telephone box passed from the Muggle world into the magical one.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,” the voice said. Then the doors opened, and Harry and James stepped out.

Harry looked around in awe. There was a bustle to this place not unlike the Muggle underground, but the high ceilings, decorated in peacock blue and golden symbols, made it seem far more grandiose than anything Harry had ever seen, even more than Hogwarts. The symbols moved and changed, sliding around the ceiling. Along the dark walls were fireplaces with ornate golden frames, coming to life every few moments with green flames as wizards stepped out on their way to work. Harry realized one side had a queue of wizards who were leaving; the other side was where wizards entered.

In the center stood a large, golden fountain, portraying the sentient creatures of the magical world. A witch and a wizard each raised a wand, and from their tips, water spilled out and into the basin below. Grouped around them were a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The latter images were staring up at the witch and wizard adoringly, and Harry found it a little revolting. Harry had only met three centaurs in his life, which he thought was more than most wizards, and none of them would ever look at a wizard in that way. He couldn’t imagine any goblins that visited the Ministry felt any better about the fountain. House-elves, well, they certainly looked at wizards that way. Perhaps not Mellie, but most house-elves.

Still, the light reflecting off the golden figures sparkled in the water, and lights danced around the room. It was a wonderful sight.

“I always wanted to bring you down here one day,” James said. He was smiling at Harry’s wonder, though it was a little sad. “Just hoped it’d be under better circumstances. Ah, here they are.”
The telephone booth had returned, and this time Sirius and Lily popped out of it. Lily smoothed the front of her Muggle dress. She and Sirius now wore silver badges like James and Harry’s.

“Alright, we’re off,” James said, and started down the wide walkway.

“What about Remus?”

Lily stroked Harry’s hair down one last time. It sprang back up defiantly. “Remus is going to wait for us outside.”

At first, Harry wondered if Remus was allowed in the Ministry, then thought it was more likely Remus simply did not want to enter the Ministry of Magic. Or perhaps it was a little of both.

They walked past the fountain, following the stream of Ministry of Magic employees toward a set of large, gilded gates. But before they reached them, James led Harry off to the side, towards a sign that said “Security.”

“Morning, Eric,” James said with a wide smile.

The man behind the desk looked at them over his newspaper. “Bit early to be this cheery, isn’t it?”

“Ah, you know me, always sunshine and unicorns.”

Sirius snorted behind Harry.

The man seemed unimpressed with James and pulled a golden dish out and set it on the table. Then he took a long, thin rod and waved it over James. He passed it over James’s front and back, then, apparently satisfied, jerked his thumb at the dish. James set his wand in the bowl, the instrument vibrated, and a narrow strip of parchment came out of the base. Eric glanced at it only briefly before sticking the parchment on a small, brass spike.

“Next,” he said, and Harry stepped forward.

Eric waved the then wand over Harry, then held out his hand. “Wand.”

Harry handed over his wand, and the wizard dumped it into the dish. The parchment spat out again, and this time, the wizard read the specifications out loud. “Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use four years. That correct?”

“Yes,” Harry said, and tried to sound confident.

“I keep this,” Eric put the parchment on the spike, on top of James’s, “and you get this back,” and he thrust the wand at Harry. “Next.”

Lily stepped forward, and she underwent the same process as Harry. When she was done, Sirius went.

“Brought the whole family for a visit, did you?” grumbled Eric as he took Sirius’s wand.

“Why not make a day of it?” James smiled, and Harry wondered how his father was behaving so cheerfully. Harry, personally, thought his insides might fall apart from anxiety.

When Sirius was finished, James said, “Thank you,” waved, and led Lily, Sirius, and Harry inside.

Once past the golden gates, Lily took James’s hand and together they headed into a smaller hallway, lined with a couple dozen lifts, all with golden gates for doors. A few wizards were
staring at James and Lily. They did look out of place in their Muggle clothes, but Harry supposed they couldn’t help that. They’d had to come by way of Muggle transport. James and Lily were also rather tall, and Lily’s bright red hair and James’s perpetually messy hair stood out in the crowd. But Sirius was tall, too, and he didn’t get quite as many sideways glances. It was like walking in Diagon Alley all over again, except people weren’t whispering excitedly anymore. Their expressions were more disdainful.

James and Lily did not notice, or at least they pretended not to. They kept their heads high, and James even smiled and said good morning to a few people, who only gave hasty nods back.

As the four of them squeezed into a lift, Sirius leaned over and whispered to Harry, “The Ministry knows your dad’s one of Dumbledore’s. His old friends aren’t too keen on being friends at the moment. Could cost them their jobs if they’re too open about it.”

“So how does Dad know which friends support us but are just afraid to lose their jobs, and which think we’re liars?”

Sirius smiled wearily and shrugged.

The gates closed with a clang and the lift began to ascend. The witches and wizards who were crowded into the lift with them turned their heads to look at Harry, but whether it was his identity, his Muggle clothes, or merely his age that made him a curiosity, he didn’t know. He kept his eyes on the floor and brushed his bangs over his forehead.

The same voice that had greeted them in the telephone box said, “Level seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office.”

As the lift gates slid open, and a few wizards slipped out, Harry saw a hallway covered in Quidditch posters. A broom zipped across the hallway and a wizard chased after it. Harry didn’t get a chance to see anything more as the lift doors closed.

They moved up again, and the voice said, “Level six, Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparition Test Center.” About four witches and a wizard squeezed past Harry and Sirius to get to the exit. Paper planes swooped in and zipped around the lift, apparently using it just as well as the people.

The lift doors closed again and up they went.

By the time they reached level three, nearly all the witches and Wizards had left the lift. And, after two witches slipped off to the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, Harry was alone with James, Lily, and Sirius in the lift. James let out a deep breath of air and shoved his hand underneath his glasses to rub his eyes. It was a strangely brief expression of exhaustion, but before Harry could ask if his dad was alright, the lift doors opened once more.

“Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services.”

“This is us.” James smiled, and, hand still tightly wrapped around Lily’s, led the way off the lift.

Harry looked at his watch in an effort to think about something other than the knot in his stomach. It was only fifteen to eight. His hearing wasn’t for another hour. What could they possibly do in all that time?
But when he looked around the office, he saw a few familiar faces. Kingsley Shacklebolt, for one, stood at the back of the office, towering above the cubicles, and the Prewett brothers were leaning over a nearby desk, laughing about something. None of them, however, looked in their direction or said hello.

A woman in an eyepatch looked up at them as they came in. “What are you doing up here, Potter? Aren’t you usually down nagging the Magical Creatures office?”

“I like to vary my schedule,” James said with a grin. “Last week I stopped by level three, made a bit of a fuss at Andrews’s desk. Is Arthur in today? His son and mine are good friends. Thought we’d say hello while we’re here.”

The witch frowned at him, like she was not looking forward to the fuss he was about to make here. “No, he just left to deal with a regurgitating toilet. Didn’t say when he’d be back. Is that all?”

“Well, we’ve got an appointment with Amelia.” James checked his watch. “It’s not for an hour, but it never hurts to be early.”

“You can wait in the Atrium if you’re here so early,” she pointed at the lift. “Amelia left, anyway. Headed downstairs about ten minutes ago, grumbling about notices.”

James raised his eyebrows and he glanced at Lily. She pressed her lips together into a very tight line, and Harry, not for the first time and certainly not for the last time, tried and failed to translate his parents’ silent conversation.

“Did she say where she was headed?” Lily asked.

“Courtrooms, I think. What’s it matter to you? If you’ve got an appointment with her, she’ll be back in time. She’s not the type to skip out on a meeting.”

“Worth checking in on,” Sirius said in a voice low enough to escape the witch’s notice.

“We’ll be back then,” James said, and waved at the witch. “Nice seeing you, Marcy.”

Marcy did not look pleased to see him, nor even to see him go, as they walked back to the lift. James pushed the button to call the lift and said, “They wouldn’t really have it in the courtrooms.”

“After the fuckery they pulled with Remus last year?” Sirius snapped.

“Changing the time and place on us is likely,” Lily whispered, “especially if they don’t want Dumbledore to show up. We should head downstairs.”

“Dumbledore’s supposed to be at my hearing?” Harry asked.

“We’ll be fine without him,” James said, though the tightness in his jaw suggested he wasn’t as sure as he sounded.

The lift door opened and revealed Alice Longbottom, looking unusually stressed. Her eyes lit up when she saw the Potters and motioned them inside.

“Thank Merlin,” she said as the lift doors closed. “Frank just ran down to the Atrium to see if he could catch you arriving. We ran into Marchbanks on the way in this morning. She was hobbling down to Courtroom Ten, complained to Frank and I about having to get involved in some Underage Disciplinary Hearing. We guessed that was you.”
“We’d just about figured out we’d been had,” Lily grumbled. “When’s the hearing?”

“She told Frank she had to be there by eight.”

Harry looked down at his watch at the same time his father did.

“Glad we ran into you,” James said. “We wouldn’t make it at all if we had to wander around downstairs looking for the right courtroom.”

“Why did they change —” Harry started to ask, but the lift doors opened on level four, and two wizards got in.

One was rather elderly, not much younger than Dumbledore, Harry thought, and he looked particularly grumpy. “What’s the point in writing a ban on experimental breeding if idiot wizards are going to make fire-breathing chickens?”

“Sorry, sir, the report only just came in. Bob brought in one of the chickens.”

“One? Are there more?”

The elderly wizard and his partner got off in the Atrium, but Harry’s parents didn’t move. They continued their downward descent.

“Sorry, Harry,” James said as soon as they were gone. “We were afraid the Ministry might pull something like this.”

“Why would they change the time and place?”

“Can’t defend yourself if you don’t show up,” Sirius said.

“But that’s not fair!”

“No, it isn’t.” Lily flattened his hair. “The price of being unpopular with the Ministry.”

“I was plenty popular with them after Remus’s arrest,” James snapped. “They still pulled useless, backwards laws out of their asses, and messed with times and places, and if I hadn’t been with Remus —”

The golden gate of the lift slid open and the woman’s voice overhead said, “Department of Mysteries.”

“I’d better go find Frank,” Alice said. “Courtroom Ten. Good luck!”

James, Lily, Sirius, and Harry stepped off the elevator. There was a long, dark corridor, with a door at the end. It was entirely black and reminded Harry strangely of Grimmauld Place. He stepped towards it, but James took his arm.

“This way, Harry.”

They went through a side door, and hurried down a flight of stairs.

“This is utter hippogriff shit,” Lily said through gritted teeth. “I swear, I’m going to send Amelia a Howler when we get home for this.”

“I doubt she’s responsible,” James said, and threw open another door. This one opened onto another corridor of stone walls, lit with torches. “I’d blame Fudge or Malfoy.”
Harry jogged to keep up with his parents’ quick pace. He looked at his watch. Two minutes past eight. He was already late.

They ran past large, wooden doors with iron bolts, each numbered with metal placards. Harry was panting by the time they reached number ten.

James pushed opened the door, and Harry stepped forward. He realized Sirius was not following, and turned, but Sirius shook his head.

“I’m not allowed. Good luck.”

Lily took Harry’s hand and gently pulled him forward. The door thudded shut loudly behind them, its iron handle clanging against the metal braces. As the echo faded into silence, Harry felt certain his heartbeat was audible to the entire room. The only thing that gave him the courage to walk forward was that his mother and father were right there with him.
The Hearing

Chapter Summary

Harry's trial goes about as well as can be expected.

Chapter Notes

Shoutout to my beta ageofzero who both understands when I need to take breaks from writing and when to push me to write more. Also for their patience getting me over really simple hurdles in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry looked around the courtroom and was struck instantly by its familiarity. He’d never been here before, at least not physically, but he had been here in Dumbledore’s memories. He’d watched Barty Crouch sentence his own son to life in Azkaban. Harry knew Barty Crouch, Jr. had committed a horrible crime, but Barty Crouch, Sr.’s coldness had seemed harsh to Harry. He couldn’t imagine his own father being so awful to him, no matter what Harry had done. But Harry, of course, had grown up with a father who loved and cared for him. Harry suspected that Barty Crouch, Jr.’s affections for Voldemort were spurred by a father who was not as supportive as Harry’s — not that it excused any of Barty’s actions. Harry had learned from watching Sirius and Regulus that, parents or not, you were responsible for your own choices, but he’d also learned from watching Sirius and Regulus just the sort of impact parents could have on their children.

The courtroom itself was a round room, walls comprised of cold stone and lit with torches. There were benches around the room, filled with wizards in plum robes, each wearing a large, silver “W” on their chest. At the head, where Harry had last seen Barty Crouch, Sr. sat Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge. He was a round man, who usually had a jovial smile for Harry and had once been voted “Most Fashionable Wizard” by Witch Weekly. Today, though, he was not wearing his signature green bowler hat nor his friendly smile. He looked down on the three Potters with a cold expression that grated on Harry’s temper.

On Fudge’s left sat Amelia Bones. Harry had seen her at his eleventh birthday, but she was the sort of family friend he probably would not have seen again until his seventeenth birthday, then perhaps at his wedding. Their families were associated by family history rather than familiarity. She looked down on Harry through her monocle, face completely impassive. Harry could only trust Tonks’s encouragement that Amelia Bones would be fair to him.

On Fudge’s right was another witch, leaning back in her chair, too far for Harry to get a good look at her face. He did, however, see her hands folded neatly over her stomach, jeweled rings glinting in the torchlight.

In the front of the court sat a very familiar face: Percy Weasley. He had a parchment in front of him and a quill his hands, but he was studiously ignoring the Potters. He refused to meet Harry’s eyes or show any sign of recognition, despite the fact that his family knew Harry’s rather well, and he
and Harry had attended school together for three years, and they had spent a handful of holidays together.

“You’re late,” Fudge said.

“Sorry,” Harry said, and tore his eyes away from Percy Weasley. He found his throat was suddenly dry. He glanced between his parents, briefly, then added, “We didn’t know the time had changed.”

“That is not the Wizengamot’s fault. An owl was sent to you this morning.”

“We must have just missed it,” Lily said. “Do you recall about what time it was sent?”

Fudge’s mouth pressed into a tight line. “About seven.”

“Goodness,” she said, and turned to James, “security alone took us, what, thirty minutes? We don’t exactly live in the city, either.”

“Well, we made it here alright,” James said. “Sounds like we got lucky. Shall we get started?”

Harry, though he had known his parents for fifteen years, could not detect an ounce of frustration or bitterness in their voices or expressions. He remembered when Mr. Diggory and Mr. Andrews had stopped by the Potter’s home to make sure James and Lily were handling Remus’s werewolf transformations in a legal manner. His parents, though Harry knew how stressed they had been, had been perfectly polite hosts, all smiles and manners, until their guests were gone. Harry didn’t know how they did it. They were terrible liars when it came to keeping things from Harry, but in front of the Ministry they were suddenly experts.

“Yes,” Fudge said grumpily, “take your seats.”

Harry looked at the chair in the center of the room, straight-backed, with chains dangling over the armrest of it. Harry had seen those chains binding Igor Karkaroff in Dumbledore’s memory. He was not too keen on sitting there himself, but his mother put a gentle hand on his back, and he stepped forward. The chains rattled as he sat in them, but they did not move any more than that.

There were two chairs to Harry’s left, and James and Lily took one each. Though these chairs did not have chains, their flat wooden seats and straight backs did not look much more comfortable.

“The accused being present — finally —” Fudge said, as if Harry had been an hour late instead of just five minutes, “— let us begin.” Fudge cleared his throat.

“Disciplinary hearing of the twelfth of August,” as Fudge spoke, Percy Weasley began scribbling on his parchment, “into offenses committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at Styncon Gardens, Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire.

“Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister.

“Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley —”

“— Witnesses for the defense, Lily Juniper Potter, James Fleamont Potter, and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.”

Harry turned in his chair to look as Dumbledore strode into the dungeon. He saw his parents
visibly relax as Dumbledore approached them. The court, however, seemed less enthused by Dumbledore’s arrival. Several turned to their neighbor, muttering to each other. Harry counted five staring in open shock. Not everyone was displeased, though. Two elderly witches in the back waved politely at Dumbledore.

“Ah,” Fudge said, adjusting in his seat as if it had suddenly become uncomfortable, “Dumbledore. Yes. You — er — got our message that the time and — er — place of the hearing had been changed, then?”

“I must’ve missed it,” Dumbledore said, voice as polite as James and Lily’s had been, “but due to a lucky mistake, I arrived at the Ministry three hours early, so no harm done.”

Harry watched James cover a sly smile with his hand. Lily, though her shoulders had relaxed, kept a fixed stare on Fudge.

“Yes — well — I suppose we’ll need another chair — I — Weasley, could you — ?”

“Not to worry, not to worry.” Dumbledore took his wand from the sleeve of his deep blue robes and Conjured a squishy armchair that looked far comfier than the chair Harry sat in. He seated himself with a pleasant smile and, when the Wizengamot was still muttering and Fudge was still gaping, waved his hand like they were welcome to continue.

“Yes.” Fudge shuffled through a series of parchment pieces. “Well, then. So. The charges, yes.” He pulled a piece of parchment from his stack and began to read, “The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did knowingly, deliberately, and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on August the second at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offense under paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under section thirteen of the International Confederation of Wizards’ Statute of Secrecy. You are Harry James Potter, of Styncon Gardens, Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?”

“Yes, but —”

“And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?”

“Yes, but —”

“Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?”

“Yes, but —”

“Knowing that you were in a Muggle-inhabited area?”

“Yes, but —”

“Fully aware that you were in close proximity to two Muggles at the time?

“Yes, but I only used it because we were —”
Amelia Bones cut him off this time. “You produced a fully fledged Patronus?”

“Yes.” Harry was growing exasperated. “I did it because —”

“A corporeal Patronus?”

“A — what?”

“Your Patronus has a clearly defined form? I mean to say, it was more than vapor or smoke?”

“Yes, it’s a stag. Always a stag.”

Now some of the other members on the Wizengamot were whispering to each other.

“Always?” asked Madam Bones. “You have produced a Patronus before now?”

“Yes, I’ve been doing it for over a year —”

“And you are fifteen years old?”

“Yes, and —”

“You learned this at school?”

“Yes, Uncle Re — er — Professor Lupin taught me in my third year, because of the —”

“Impressive. A true patronus, at your age. Very impressive indeed.”

Some of the Wizengamot nodded in agreement with Madam Bones. Others shook their heads and muttered to themselves. Harry imagined they were saying things that could have come out of a Rita Skeeter article. He didn’t have any Extendable Ears on him, but it wasn’t hard to guess based on how they were looking at him.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who still had his hands folded under his chin, and his eyes on Fudge. He looked to his parents and met his mother’s eyes. She gave him a half-smile of encouragement. James was not looking at Harry, but he was watching the Wizengamot’s reactions with obvious pride. That, as much as Lily’s smile, encouraged Harry.

“It’s not a question of how impressive the magic was,” Fudge said, bringing the Wizengamot back to order. “In fact, the more impressive, the worse it is, I would have thought, given that the boy did it in plain view of two Muggles!”

“I did it because of the dementors!” Harry finally managed to get out, without being interrupted.

An absolute silence filled the room. Madam Bones raised her eyebrow in such a high arch that her monocle fell out.

“Dementors? What do you mean, child?”

“I mean that my mother and I were attacked by dementors.”

Fudge’s smile was patronizing, and far worse than any of the innocently patronizing smiles of Mrs. Diggory. “I thought we’d be hearing something like this.”

Madam Bones looked between Lily and Harry. “Dementors out in the Cotswolds? I don’t understand.”
“Don’t you, Amelia?” Fudge said. “Let me explain. They’ve been thinking it through and decided dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles can’t see dementors, can they? Highly convenient, highly convenient. So it’s just your word —”

“And mine,” Lily said.

“Well of course, you’ll corroborate his story, you’re his mother.”

“It was quite obvious to me,” James said, “when they returned from their walk, they’d been attacked by dementors.”

“I hate to interrupt what must be a well-rehearsed story between the three of you, but —”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. The silence that fell was almost as heavy as when Harry had told them he’d been attacked.

“I may be wrong,” Dumbledore began in a quiet voice, “but I am sure that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Parent or not? Isn’t that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?”

“Perfectly true,” said Madam Bones.

“But you can’t possibly believe —” Fudge began, but he glanced at Madam Bones and sighed. “Very well, Dumbledore, we’ll listen to the tale you’ve all conjured. Let the record reflect that Lily Juniper Potter is the mother of the accused and a former teacher at Hogwarts School.”

Harry saw his mother’s jaw tighten, and he didn’t quite understand why. All the things Fudge had said were true, and none of them were bad things.

“What,” Fudge said in a bored tone, “is your story?”

“On August second, Harry and I took a walk into the Muggle village to deliver a letter to my sister,” Lily said. “She lives in a Muggle suburb, so I don’t send her owls, of course. I’ve been writing to her since Harry was born, and thought a walk into town with my son would be a nice way to spend an afternoon. We sent the letter, bought some ice cream, and headed home.”

“I didn’t know you got ice cream,” James interrupted. “I was going to make you a dessert that night.”

“Mr. Potter,” Amelia Bones interrupted, “if you would kindly refrain from interrupting Mrs. Potter’s statement.”

“Yes, of course,” James said, and sat back in his chair. “Sorry, continue.”

“As I was saying,” Lily said, “I began walking home with Harry. We ran into some Muggles who’d been hiking along the Cotswolds for their anniversary.”

“What a lovely idea,” James said. “We should do that —”

“Mr. Potter!” Fudge said.

“Sorry, sorry, it won’t happen again.”

Fudge’s annoyance, however, didn’t seem to be shared by all of the court. A few of them were smiling at James as though he were an excitable child, and they found him both charming and amusing.
“We walked with them for a while,” Lily continued, “talked about the summer weather and about their careers. Then… Well, it all happened so quickly. I was taken off guard. The stars suddenly went out, and I saw two cloaked figures move slowly towards us….” Her smile was long gone, her green eyes focused on something much farther away than the Wizengamot she was speaking to. “I heard a scream…. It wasn’t — well, it was only the scream I hear in my nightmares, a mother’s old fear of losing her baby,” she tried to laugh, but it was weak, “then everything went white, but not before I… not before I managed to see the dementor’s face….”

A shudder passed through the Wizengamot. James reached his hand out and held Lily’s.

“Then there was a burst of silver light. I could see properly again, and a stag gored the dementor with its antlers then galloped away with it. Then they were gone. I was still in shock. I’d never been so close to a dementor before, it was…..” She paused, then said, “It was not perhaps the most fearful thing I’ve ever done, but it is certainly up there. I couldn’t seem to move, and it was Harry who carried me home. He made sure, too, to give the Muggles proper instructions about where to go, and encouraged them to get warm. He handled the situation surprisingly well, and I’m honestly a little embarrassed I was so useless….”

Harry had never considered his mother a particularly good actress, except when it came to brave faces. Her small laugh at her own fear was so strangely unlike Lily, who preferred to face her fears with a fierce glare rather than a weak laugh, but when he looked around at the Wizengamot, a handful of them seemed moved by her story. Perhaps they remembered Lily Potter had stood to face Voldemort to defend her son. Perhaps they were impressed that she had not tried to remind them of this fact, and had let them recall it on their own.

Some, however, shook their heads, clearly under the impression she had only invented her story to defend her son.

Fudge drummed his fingers against the desk. “Yes, how fitting that your story paints your son as a hero.”

“Those are your words, Minister, not mine.”

James came down with a sudden coughing fit that Harry was pretty sure was laughter.

Fudge at least had the sense to be red in the face. “Mr. Potter — if you are done —”

James nodded and coughed again, poorly hiding his smile behind his hand. “If I could just get some water —”

Dumbledore waved his wand and a glass of water appeared in his hand. He used a Levitation Charm to pass it to James.

“Thank you.” He took a sip from the glass and settled back into his chair. “Now, shall I begin?”

“We are all waiting.”

“Right, so, I think everyone here knows me, but Percy, be sure to take this down: I’m James Fleamont Potter, father of Harry James Potter, previously and hereafter referred to as the accused, and I have not taught at Hogwarts, though I did go there as a boy, and I believe I was the top student — ah, wait, my wife was the top student of our year, and actually I took third after —”

“Mr. Potter,” Fudge interrupted, “if you’d kindly present your statement.”

“Sorry, Minister, I was getting to it.”
But rather than upsetting most of the Wizengamot, they continued to be charmed by James’s natural attitude and pleasant humor.

“Right then. On the night of August second, I had stopped down in Diagon Alley. I was looking at new brooms. Mine’s a bit out of fashion, and I was trying to decide if it was worth springing for a Firebolt if I’m only playing recreationally. It’s a bit pricey, isn’t it? But it’s also embarrassing if you’re practicing with your son and he outstrips you by a mile. You can check with Bantham Boulder. He was working the shop that night, and we had a pleasant chat about models coming out for the new season. I ended up not making a purchase, and went home.”

Harry knew for a fact that James had been with Remus on work for the Order, and he supposed his father could have stopped in Diagon Alley before coming home, but it seemed unlikely. Harry was surprised by his father’s confidence in the story.

“It took me awhile to get home,” James continued. “You remember the whole business with Regulus Black of course, and we still have several enchantments on our property in case he comes back to England, so I had a fair bit of a walk. I like to Apparate home on the west side, then I don’t have to walk into the sun in the evenings, and I get to walk through the rose garden. It’s especially lovely in the summer, you know, lovely fragrance. So I finally get home, only to find Lily and Harry aren’t home. I didn’t know they’d gone for ice cream in the Muggle village — it would have been nice if she’d left a note —” James paused for the gentle laughter from a few of the witches in the Wizengamot “— so I decided I’d set about making sure we had a nice dessert for the evening. I was going over the ingredients in our pantry with one of the house-elves, trying to see if we had enough to get a lemon meringue together — it’s one of Lily’s favorites — when I saw Harry and Lily coming up the walkway to the house. It was dark, and I didn’t notice Harry was carrying Lily until I got to the door. When I opened it, I saw how awful Lily looked. She was… well, she was horribly pale, honestly, she looked half-dead. I took her from Harry, but before I could ask them what happened, Harry was asking for chocolate. I didn’t understand. It wasn’t until we got the letter and I learned that Harry had cast a Patronus charm that I understood what had happened. I thought to myself, ‘I’m impressed he can cast a Patronus, and I’m surprised he knew what to do to help Lily.’ But of course, there were dementors at Hogwarts two years ago, and they did nearly kill Harry, you’ll remember, so of course it makes sense he would have known what to do.”

There was a quiet murmur from among the Wizengamot. Harry was certain they did remember when the dementors had been removed from Hogwarts because they’d tried to administer a dementor’s kiss to a student, Harry being the student in question. James had stood in front of the Wizengamot that week, too, defending Sirius. Harry realized this was the third time in just over a year James had come to the Wizengamot to defend someone in the family.

“I think we are all quite impressed by his quick thinking,” Madam Bones said, and made a few quick scratches on her parchment.

“You can’t be serious,” said Fudge. “Dementors, wandering around the Cotswolds, and just happening to come across two wizards? The odds on that must be very, very long, even Bagman wouldn’t have bet —”

“I don’t think any of us believe the dementors were there by coincidence,” said Dumbledore.

The witch on Fudge’s right shifted, her rings sparkling as she moved, but everyone else was perfectly still.

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Fudge.

“It means that I think they were ordered there.”
I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of dementors to go for a hike down the Cotswolds!"

Though Fudge had begun to raise his voice, Dumbledore was perfectly calm. “Not if the dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry of Magic these days. I have already given you my views on this matter, Cornelius.”

“Yes, you have, and I have no reason to believe that your views are anything other bilge, Dumbledore. The dementors remain in place in Azkaban and are doing everything we ask them to.”

“Then we must ask ourselves why somebody within the Ministry ordered a pair of dementors out to the Cotswolds on the second of August.”

The witch on Fudge’s right leaned forward, finally bringing her face into the light. Harry’s immediate thought was that she looked a lot like a particular toad he had once caught in the pond near his home. She had a very flat face and a flabby chin that seemed to blend right into the rest of her body. She wore plum robes like the rest of the Wizengamot, but in her hair sat a big, black bow. Her large, round eyes seemed to look straight through Harry as she cleared her throat with a quiet, “Hem-hem.”

“The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister,” Fudge said.

In a strangely girlish voice for the wrinkles in the corners of her mouth and center of her forehead, the witch said, “I’m sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore. So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy.” Her laughter was as high and clear as silver bells, but it was not humored at all. Even the few other members of the court who laughed with her did not sound particularly amused.

“If it is true that the dementors are taking orders only from the Ministry of Magic, and it is also true that two dementors attacked Lily and Harry Potter a week ago, then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks.” Dumbledore was polite, his voice neither condescending nor frustrated. “Of course, these particular dementors may have been outside Ministry control —”

“There are no dementors outside Ministry control!” Fudge said, face nearing the shade of his robes.

“Then undoubtedly,” Dumbledore said in a calm voice, “the Ministry will be making a full inquiry into why two dementors were so very far from Azkaban, and why they attacked without authorization.”

“It is not for you to decide what the Ministry of Magic does or does not do, Dumbledore!”

“Of course it isn’t. I was merely expressing my confidence that this matter will not go uninvestigated.”

“I would remind everybody,” Fudge said, “that the behavior of these dementors, if they indeed are not figments of this boy’s imagination, is not the subject of this hearing! We are here to examine Harry Potter’s offenses under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!”

“Of course we are, but the presence of dementors in the Cotswolds is highly relevant. Clause seven
of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and those exceptional circumstances include situations that threaten the life of the wizard or witch himself, or witches, wizards, or Muggles present at the time of the —”

“We are familiar with clause seven, thank you very much!”

“Of course you are. Then we are in agreement that Harry’s use of the Patronus Charm in these circumstances falls precisely into the category of exceptional circumstances it describes?”

“If there were dementors, which I doubt —”

“I’m sure James and Lily Potter would be happy to answer any questions you might still have about the incident —”

“I — that — not — I want this over with today, Dumbledore!”

“But naturally,” Dumbledore said, calm voice a stark contrast to Fudge’s blustering, “you would not care how many times you heard from a witness, if the alternative was a serious miscarriage of justice.”

“Serious miscarriage, my hat!” Fudge shouted, and slammed his hand down so violently that a bottle of ink upset itself onto the bench. “Have you ever bothered to tot up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with, Dumbledore, while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic out of school? I suppose you’ve forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago in front of his Muggle relative —”

“That wasn’t me, it was a house-elf,” said Harry.

“You see? A house-elf! In a Muggle house! I ask you —”

“The house-elf in question,” said Dumbledore, “is currently in the employ of Hogwarts School. I can summon him here in an instant to give evidence if you wish.”

“I — not — I haven’t got time to listen to house-elves! Anyway, that’s not the only — I haven’t even started on what he gets up to at school —”

“— but as the Ministry has no authority to punish Hogwarts students for misdemeanors at school,” Dumbledore said voice finally tinted with a quiet anger, but still polite, “Harry’s behavior there is not relevant to this inquiry.”

“Oho! Not our business what he does at school, eh? You think so?”

“The Ministry does not have the power to expel Hogwarts students, Cornelius, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August. Nor does it have the right to confiscate wands until charges have been successfully proven, again, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August. In your admirable haste to ensure that the law is upheld, you appear, inadvertently I am sure, to have overlooked a few laws yourself.”

“Laws can be changed.”

“Of course they can. And you certainly seem to be making many changes, Cornelius. Why, in the few short weeks since I was asked to leave the Wizengamot, it has already become the practice to hold a full criminal trial to deal with a simple matter of underage magic!”

The court was silent, though a few wizards shifted in their seats. Amelia Bones was staring at
Dumbledore with an expression Harry could only describe as impressed. Fudge, however, looked furious.

“As far as I am aware, however,” Dumbledore said, once again folding his hands, “there is no law yet in place that says this court’s job is to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever performed. He has been charged with a specific offense and he has presented his defense. All he and his family can do now is to await your verdict.”

Harry felt like he’d hardly said anything so far, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for the court to make their decision. Dumbledore and Fudge had done quite a bit of talking, but Harry wasn’t sure any of it had really had to do with him or his trial.

The Wizengamot whispered amongst themselves, and Harry tried to catch Dumbledore’s eye, hoping to see a sign of confidence there, but Dumbledore was staring studiously at Fudge. Harry looked to his parents and saw his mother focused on Fudge and Umbridge. His father, however, caught his eye and winked.

Harry looked up at Fudge, but found that too difficult, so instead he stared down at his shoes. He wished he knew what the court was whispering about it. It seemed to go on forever, but he knew, certainly, they couldn’t be deliberating too long. Then the whispering stopped, and Harry still stared at his shoes.

It wasn’t until Madam Bones asked, “Those in favor of clearing the accused of all charges?” that Harry looked up.

Many witches and wizards raised their hands. Harry’s heart leapt into his chest as he tried to count them all, but before he could finish, Madam Bones said, “And those in favor of conviction.”

Fudge and Dolores Umbridge raised their hands. About half a dozen other witches did as well, but it was far less than half the court.

Fudge looked around, purple face betrayed, but it was clear that he had lost.

“Very well, very well,” he said. “Cleared of all charges.”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. He stood and waved his wand, Vanishing his armchair and James’s water glass. “Well, I must be getting along. Good day to you all.”

And like that, Dumbledore strode out of the dungeon.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
The Woes of Mrs. Weasley

Chapter Summary

Harry's last few weeks of summer are not quite as thrilling as they could be.

Chapter Notes

Shout out to my beta, ageofzero, who is the most patient and helpful beta I could ask for. And shoutout to all my real life friends who text me when they have questions about the Harry Potter Universe, as if I'm some sort of expert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Dumbledore strode out of the courtroom, the Wizengamot stood, chattering to each other. Not one of them looked in Harry’s direction, except for Dolores Umbridge, who kept a steady gaze on him. It was not the sort of curious stare Harry was used to from strangers, who searched him until they found his scar, and he did not think flattening his hair over his forehead would make her look away. He found himself, staring back at her, unsure what to do, until Lily put a gentle hand on his elbow, and together they walked out of the courtroom.

Sirius was leaning lazily against the wall, and he didn’t move much when he saw them, but Harry did see his jaw tighten.

“Well?” Sirius asked, once they were all close enough to him. “What happened? Dumbledore didn’t say what the verdict —”

“Cleared,” Lily said, and Harry noticed how breathless she was with relief.

Sirius grinned at Harry. “I knew you would be.” His eyes drifted up and over Harry’s shoulder as the Wizengamot began to exit the courtroom. “Merlin, is that the full court?”

“Charming, aren’t they?” James said with a wry smile. As they passed, James called to several by name and said hello. Only a few met his gaze, though the elderly witches who had waved to Dumbledore stopped to shake James’s hand.

The very last to leave the dungeon were Fudge, Umbridge, and Percy. Fudge ignored them, despite James’s polite, “How do you do, Minister?” Umbridge had the same chilling stare for Harry as she passed him, as if she saw neither his parents nor Sirius. Harry resisted the urge to look away, and stared back at her. Percy walked straight past them with his nose in the air. Lily opened her mouth to call to him, but in the end, she changed her mind and said nothing.

“Well,” James said, now that the hallway was empty, “shall we go upstairs and tell Arthur the good news? Though he might not be back from that whatever it was Marcy said he had.”

“Regurgitating toilet, I think. But perhaps we’d better get back.” Lily lead them towards the end of the hallway. “We oughtn’t keep Remus waiting.”
“I don’t really fancy another conversation with Marcy,” Sirius said, as they started up the stairs.

“Hah!” James’s laugh was unusually bitter. “Who does all the talking around here? You get to stand behind me, thinking about your best angles, while I have to smile and prattle on like an idiot who doesn’t know everyone’s looking at him like he’s as mad as a kneazle in a —”

Harry never did find out what James’s analogy was going to be, because as they exited the stairwell into the ninth floor corridor, they ran into Cornelius Fudge and Lucius Malfoy.

The last time Harry had seen Lucius Malfoy, Malfoy had returned to him his wand so he could duel Lord Voldemort. Malfoy had been wearing a mask and a hood, of course, but Harry knew all too well that cold, calm voice, and that cold laugh he’d heard while suffering the Cruciatus Curse.

“Well, well, well… Patronus Potter. The Minster was just telling me about your lucky escape. Quite astonishing, really.”

“He’s got a talent for getting out of tight spaces,” Lily said, her hand suddenly on Harry’s shoulder, grip rather tight. “Inherited, probably. Are you doing well, Lucius?”

“Quite.” His upper lip curled as he spoke.

Harry did not know exactly what Malfoy’s role had been in the battle following his narrow escape from Voldemort’s clutches, but he did know his mother had claimed to duel Voldemort personally, and she’d had a very distinct gash across her face when she returned. He wondered if she’d gotten a hex off on Malfoy.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Sirius half-growled. He, too, had fought in the battle after Harry’s escape and barely managed to save Regulus. Harry thought he saw Sirius’s gray eyes flick towards the black door at the end of the corridor, but they quickly refocused on Malfoy.

“I don’t think private matters between myself and the Minister are any concern of yours.” Malfoy smoothed the front of his robes, and Harry heard the gentle chime of gold coins shifting in his pockets. “I could ask you the same thing, seeing how you’re a disinherited disgrace with no influence, and certainly no business here. How is your brother doing?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sirius said. “Seen him, recently, have you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous…. Shall we go up to your office, then, Minister?”

“Certainly,” said Fudge, who had been watching the exchange with a half-dazed, half-concerned expression. “This way, Lucius.”

“Pleasure as always, Lucius,” James said, smile as jovial as it had been all morning.

Lucius did not return the courtesy, leaving the Potters with only one last disdainful look as he followed the Minister.

Lily’s grip on Harry’s shoulder finally relaxed. When Malfoy and the Minister were out of earshot, she said, “We ought to tell Dumbledore.”

“I’ll leave a report for him,” James said. “Malfoy exchanging money with the Minister can’t be good news for us.”

“I hate him,” Sirius grunted. “Wish I had taken a piss on his shoes when I had the chance at the Quidditch Cup.”
They stepped into a lift and Harry gave voice to a thought that was just beginning to form. “If… Fudge is meeting with Death Eaters like Malfoy — and he’s seeing them alone — how do we know they haven’t put the Imperius Curse on him?”

“We have considered it,” Lily said, jaw tight. “Dumbledore thinks Fudge is acting of his own accord for now.”

“Not like that’s any more comforting,” James said. The lift doors opened and he added, “But it’s best not to talk about it now.”

The four of them stepped out into the Atrium and walked past the security, past the fountain, and back to the lift that took them to the visitors entrance. They told Remus what had happened, and he congratulated Harry on being cleared. Harry thanked him, though he didn’t feel like he’d actually done anything worth being congratulated for. He felt like the congratulations ought to go to his parents and Dumbledore.

Now that they were out in the sunshine, and the trial was well behind them, Harry’s mind turned back to the question of Hogwarts, which was, unfortunately, still up in the air. James and Lily had said they’d withhold a decision until after the trial. Now Harry was free of the threat of expulsion by the Ministry, so it was left up to his parents. He wished they would at least ask him what he wanted.

As they descended into the Underground, he mentally tested different ways of phrasing the issue, but none of them seemed right. His parents didn’t even know he’d overheard their conversation, so it felt wrong to bring it up before they did. But if they tried to just tell him they’d decided not to send him back to Hogwarts…. He’d already fought with them so much this summer, he wanted to find a way to prevent a new fight from occurring.

By the time they returned to Grimmauld Place, Harry still hadn’t found a way of bringing the conversation up, and his thoughts were entirely derailed by the chaos that descended on the house as news of the trial outcome was announced in the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed his cheek. Fred, George, and Ginny’s cheer of excitement quickly turned into a dance around the table, shouting and singing, “He got off! He got off! He got off!”

“I knew it!” Ron said. “You always get away with stuff.”

“They really didn’t have a case,” Hermione said. Her hands were shaking with relief, though, as she said it.

“He got off! He got off! He got off!”

“You’re back so early,” Neville said. “It didn’t take long then, did it?”

Cedric offered Harry only a small smile and a quiet congratulations, then stifled a yawn and politely excused himself.

“He got off! He got off! He got off!”

“Settle down, please!” Mrs. Weasley shouted. “I’m sorry, James, I can hardly hear you —”

“Lucius Malfoy was there —”

Regulus’s brows tightened a fraction of an inch. “Malfoy? Doing what?”
“He got off! He got off! He got off!”

“Fred!” Mrs. Weasley shouted. “George — Ginny — that’s enough.”

“Exchanging money, I suppose,” James said, and ran a hand over his face. “Where’s that parchment?” He started towards one of the cupboards.

“James, dear,” Lily called over the chaos of the kitchen.

Sirius choked on a laugh.

“Hm?”

“Perhaps we’d better get out of our Muggle clothes first.”

James’s hand paused halfway to the cupboard, and Harry did not miss the brief glance James cast over the group of non-initiated children still standing in the kitchen.

“Oh, of course.”

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said, as James, Lily, Remus, and Sirius all left the kitchen, “why don’t you sit down and eat? You hardly touched your breakfast this morning.”

Harry did finally feel hungry after his trial, but he knew she was only trying to distract him from the cupboard. “Oh — thank you.”

He sat down at the table with Neville, Ron, and Hermione, and Mrs. Weasley handed him a sandwich. He made a mental note to check what was in the cupboard as soon as the kitchen was empty. Judging by Hermione’s knowing look, she was thinking the same thing.

In the meantime, he told them what had happened at his trial.

“What do you think your parents were telling the truth?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “My Mum was, at least, since I was there for all of that. I can’t imagine my dad would lie about what he was doing. He was so sure that they’d be able to prove he wasn’t lying. All they’d have to do is ask the guy at the Quidditch shop if my dad was there.”

“Maybe that guy’s in the Order?” Ron asked. “Though I’ve never seen him in here before…”

“Maybe they modified his memory,” Neville said in a quiet voice. “So he’d think he was telling the truth.”

Harry considered this. It sounded horribly underhanded, like something the Death Eaters might do. But if it was to protect the Order, would they really stoop that low? He knew his father would never approve of it — at least, the father Harry knew. Harry felt like he’d seen such a different side to his parents in this last year, as if he’d never known them in the first place.

“He got off! He got off! He got off!”

“Oh, shut up!” Mrs. Weasley shouted. “Everyone! Out of the kitchen! Out!”

Harry found himself shooed out of the kitchen, half-eaten sandwich still in hand, along with his friends and Regulus Black.

Fred, George, and Ginny’s war chant woke the rest of the house, and Regulus looked mildly
pained as he rushed around trying to silence portraits, leaving Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Neville finally away from the eyes of watchful adults.

“Do you think all the Order reports are in there?” Harry asked.

“In where?” asked Neville.

“That cupboard,” said Hermione. “Didn’t you see the way Mrs. Potter was so determined not to let them open it while we were in there?”

Ron looked at the kitchen door sadly. “Mum’s probably moving it all right now.”

“But if we know it’s in the kitchen,” Harry said, “we can go and look.”

“When?” asked Ron. “Mum watches us like a hawk. You want to sneak out of our beds at night or something?”

Neville gulped. “We can’t do that. We could get caught.”

“It can’t be worse than when we all snuck off and ran into a three-headed dog,” Harry said.

“I seem to recall,” said Hermione, “that two of us were not willing participants in that adventure.”

“Yeah, but Harry and I have made proper rule-breakers out of you and Neville by now. Come on, you know you want to know what the Order is doing.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t interested,” Hermione said. “I’ll see if I can sneak out without waking Ginny. She’ll insist on coming.”

—— —— —— ——

At midnight, Harry, Ron, and Neville got out of bed.

“Cloak?” Ron whispered.

“There’s too many of us,” Harry said. “Besides, I don’t even know if my mum knows I have it. Rather risk her catching me without it than catching me with it.”

“Good point.”

The three of them stepped as quietly as they could into the hallway. Hermione and Ginny were already waiting for them.

“How dare you try to leave me out of this,” Ginny hissed at Ron. “After everything with Mum —”

“Alright, fine, you can come, just shut up,” Ron whispered back.

Five sets of footsteps was a hard thing to keep quiet, but they’d all gotten used to tiptoeing around the house in the last few weeks, and all of them, except perhaps Neville, were relative experts at sneaking around in the dark.

They made it downstairs to the kitchen and Harry instantly went for the cupboard. It was locked, but he’d prepared by bringing the penknife Sirius and Remus had given him for Christmas last year. He wedged it between the wood paneling and unfastened the catch. “They’ve already emptied it,” he whispered dismally.
“Look in other cupboards,” Ginny said. “I’ll check the china cabinet.”

There was no talking, only the sound of soft thuds and creaks as the five of them searched desperately for any hidden information on the Order, something that might let them know what the adults were hiding.

“You’re not going to find anything,” a voice said.

All of them jumped and turned to see Regulus Black sitting at the end of the dining room table. He certainly hadn’t been sitting there before.

“Where did you come from?” asked Ginny.

Regulus didn’t answer, but Harry, Ron, Neville, and Hermione all knew a particular secret about Regulus Black that Ginny was not privy to. Regulus had spent several weeks as Ginny’s pet cat, and no one had bothered to tell her he was an Animagus.

“You’re looking for the Order’s reports, but you won’t find them,” Regulus said. “Mrs. Weasley moved them out of the kitchen. I haven’t been able to find them.”

“You’ve been looking, too?” Harry asked. “Why not just ask?”

“I’m not in the Order, either. No more than you are or Kreacher is.”

Harry wanted to protest that that made no sense, but he remembered what his mother had said about secrets being kept from Regulus, about the mistrust the Order had towards Regulus. Regulus had been a Death Eater, but had pretended to return to Voldemort with the intent of killing him. His brief return didn’t sit well with Dumbledore or many members of the Order, James and Sirius included.

It also seemed just like Regulus to go around snooping for secrets. Regulus had confessed to Harry that he had often read Sirius’s letters when he needed answers no one was giving to him.

“They let Snape in the Order,” Neville said, “but not you?”

“Dumbledore gave Snape an important job to do. He did not give me the same task.”

“What’s the job?” asked Ron.

“I think the four of you are clever enough to figure that out.”

“He’s a spy in the Death Eaters,” Hermione said, voice barely a whisper. “But you can’t do it, because you killed Barty Crouch in front of You-Know-Who.”

When Regulus nodded, Harry asked, “Dumbledore trusts him with that? Snape’s a git. I wouldn’t trust him anywhere near Voldemort.”

Regulus spread his hands and shrugged. “I’ve given Dumbledore my opinions on Snape. I think Snape’s given Dumbledore similar opinions about me. Dumbledore has not given me the reason he trusts Snape so strongly. I assume he has not told Snape why he trusts me, either.”

“Why does Dumbledore trust you?” asked Neville, who had been the last of his friends to put any faith in Regulus.

The faintest smile played around the corner of Regulus’s mouth. “Dumbledore’s a man of many secrets. It’s his job. And as much as I love hunting out others’ secrets, I’m not about to divulge my
own."

“Someone’s coming,” Ginny hissed.

There were indeed footsteps in the hallway. Regulus waved his wand, and the light in the kitchen extinguished itself. Ron, Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville ducked under the table just as the kitchen door opened. Thankfully the kitchen table was large enough to hide five adolescents, and thankfully the wizard who entered did not turn on the light. He relied on his wandlight as he walked towards the cupboard they’d investigated when they first arrived.

The wizard sighed heavily. “Molly, what did you do with it?”

“Dad,” Ron mouthed to the group.

Hermione put a finger to her lips.

There was the gentle opening and closing of more cupboards and drawers, just as they had done only moments ago.

“Can’t believe the kids would’ve gotten into it already,” Mr. Weasley murmured. “Where — Merlin, Puck, get out of the kitchen! Ginny and that darned cat…” Mr. Weasley yawned and left.

The door closed and they all waited a solid five minutes to be sure Mr. Weasley wasn’t about to return before climbing out from under the table.

“Puck’s in our room,” Ginny whispered to Hermione. “I made sure of it before we left.”

“Oh, how odd,” Hermione said. “Perhaps it was Crookshanks….”

“Crookshanks is way bigger than Puck, and fluffier. Even in the dark, Dad couldn’t mix them up.”

Neville turned the kitchen lights on, and out from under a chair came a sleek black cat with a white stripe down his chest.

Ginny looked down at the cat and blinked. “Llewelyn?”

Llewelyn, the stray cat Ginny had taken in her second year before it had mysteriously vanished at the end of term, shifted into Regulus Black.

“Oh,” Ginny said.

“Perhaps I should have told you sooner,” Regulus said, “but secrets are a habit of mine. You should know, though, I was very grateful for all the ham you fed me. It was quite the treat, fresh out of Azkaban.”

Ginny still looked a little dazed. Harry thought she might need some time to process what it really meant to have helped an escaped criminal into Hogwarts because she’d thought it was a cat that needed rescuing.

“We should get upstairs before we get caught,” Hermione said. “And, Ginny, I’ll explain everything.”

“You knew?” Ginny snapped. “For how long?”

“Talk about it somewhere else,” Ron said. “Let’s get out of here.”
“Might I have a moment, Harry?” Regulus asked.

Harry’s friends lingered in the doorway, but he told them it was alright to leave him, though his stomach twisted itself into a knot. He had a feeling he knew what Regulus wanted. There wasn’t much Regulus might want to say to him that couldn’t be said in front of Harry’s friends.

Regulus waited a moment, ear tilted towards the door. When he was sure there were no eavesdroppers, he asked, “Your nightmares…. Are they like the dreams you had last year?”

It was not the sort of question Harry was prepared for. He’d expected Regulus to ask if he was alright, or how he was coping, or even to offer tips on coping with nightmares. He had to take a moment to consider his answer. “Er — no, I guess not. Maybe sometimes? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Hm. I see. That was all I wanted to ask.”

“Oh. Okay. Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight, Harry.”

Harry, thoroughly confused, walked back upstairs. He passed Sirius’s bedroom — where his parents were staying — and noticed the light was on where it hadn’t been before. He heard voices, and he paused at the door.

“There are just so many things that could happen to him,” Lily was saying. “I just want to know he’s safe.”

“Lily,” James’s response was soft, and Harry had to turn his head to hear it properly, “what did we promise ourselves on that day?”

“I know, I know, but —”

“Lily, tell me what we promised each other. What we promised Harry.”

There was a long pause. “We promised that Harry would grow up loved. But, James, if he isn’t safe —”

“Will he be any safer here than at Hogwarts, truly? You think if you’re here to keep an eye on him, he’ll be any safer? You think he won’t slip off and run away in London, or steal a flying car in the middle of the night, or disappear on his broom? You were a professor at Hogwarts, and how much trouble did Harry get into while you were there?”

“Don’t remind me —”

“He nearly got eaten by Acromantula, and he found and fought a basilisk. Harry’s our son, he loves adventure, and he loves protecting those he loves. He’s too much like you.”

“You’re the troublemaker.”

“And you’re the fighter. He’s the worst of us both.”

Lily laughed, and Harry, despite the weight of the conversation he’d just overheard, felt lighter for it.

“Besides, he has to at least get his O.W.L.s.”
“I hate how often you’re right.”

“I thought that was why you married me.”

The bed creaked, and the light went out.

“I’m going to have nightmares the whole time he’s away,” Lily said.

“I know. I will too.”

Harry waited a little longer, but it seemed James and Lily had finished their conversation. He wondered what had prompted them awake. Had Mr. Weasley woken them to ask where the Order reports had been moved? Had they woken up from the noise as Ron, Neville, Hermione, and Ginny had passed their door? Or had they woken from nightmares, like Harry so often did.

When Harry got back to his room, Ron asked, “Well, what did he want?”

Harry had completely forgotten his brief conversation with Regulus, and he stared at the blurry shadow of Ron in the dark before remembering, “Oh, he just wanted to know if I was having weird dreams.”

“What did you tell him?” Neville asked.

“That I wasn’t dreaming anything unusual.”

It was not a lie, and Neville and Ron seemed to know what Harry meant. His nightmares were expected after his experiences.

The three beds creaked as the boys adjusted into comfortable sleeping positions. Harry was not awake long, despite what he’d overheard his parents say. He knew they worried about him constantly, and he felt a little guilty for the ways he’d encouraged that worry, like running off into a forest of Acromantula, stealing a flying car, running away.

The Triwizard Tournament and Voldemort’s return, however, had occurred by no fault of Harry’s troublemaking or heroic traits. It had all been part of Voldemort’s plot, and it had worked, perhaps not perfectly, but still too well. His parents were right to worry about him constantly, and he felt a little guilty for the ways he’d encouraged that worry, like running off into a forest of Acromantula, stealing a flying car, running away.

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Harry imagined what a school year living at Grimmauld Place might be like. Cleaning with Mrs. Weasley and Regulus all day, with no one his age to talk to. Order members would come and go, and maybe Harry would learn small secrets by listening at doorways or snooping through cabinets, but he’d have no one to share them with. He’d have no opportunity to go outside, either, no use for his broom.

At least, no matter what else happened, Harry was going back to Hogwarts.

—— —— ——

Harry thought that the comfort of knowing he was finally going back to Hogwarts would end the nightmares about his trial. Sure, he was probably going to keep dreaming about the graveyard for a long time to come, but he didn’t expect the courtrooms beneath the Ministry to keep cropping up in his dreams. Sometimes it was Umbridge, snapping his wand from Fudge’s seat in the court. Sometimes there were dementors, herding him down the hallways like they had to Barty Crouch, Jr., Regulus Black, and the Lestranges. Sometimes there was just a dark hallway, and a strange
longing to be on the other side of the black door at the end. Harry was beginning to sympathize
with Cedric’s long disappearances for afternoon naps. He was exhausted not only from his
inconsistent sleep, but also by the intensive cleaning they were still doing. The only real highlight
was listening at doors for secrets.

Mrs. Weasley and Lily, however, had become incredibly cautious since the cupboard incident. Harry did not think Regulus had told anyone they’d been in the kitchen snooping, but Harry’s parents knew him too well to think he would let such an opportunity pass him so easily. There were, unfortunately, no further opportunities as nice as that one had been. The adults were tight-lipped and doors were Imperturbed.

On the last day of the summer, booklists for the new term finally arrived.

“It’s about time,” Ron said as he walked into their room and tossed the labeled parchment envelopes to Neville and Harry. “Thought Dumbledore’d forgotten, honestly.”

“He’s been very busy,” Neville said.

Harry wondered what it was Dumbledore did all day. How much time did investigating Voldemort’s activities really take?

He ripped open the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was nothing unusual, a reminder that term began on the first, where the platform was, and when the Hogwarts Express would be leaving. The second letter told him what new books he would need, and there were only two.

“Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, and Defensive Magical Theory,” Harry read aloud. “Hm, by Wilbert Slinkhard. I wonder if Mum or Uncle Remus’ve heard of him.”

There was a crack, but nobody flinched this time, not even Neville. They’d gotten rather used to Fred and George Apparating into their room by now.

“We were just wondering who’d assigned the Slinkhard book,” said Fred, as if he’d been there the entire time.

“Means Dumbledore’s found a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” said George.

“And about time too.”

“What do you mean?” asked Neville.

“We overheard Mum and Dad talking on the Extendables a few weeks back,” said Fred, “and from what they were saying, Dumbledore was having real trouble finding anyone to do the job this year.”

“Not surprising, is it?” asked George. “Position’s cursed, everyone knows it.”

Harry had had five professors in four years, and not one of them had stayed from summer to fall. “Moody’s not coming back?” Harry asked.

“He said as much, didn’t he?” said Fred. “Besides, he’s busy with Order work these days. Wonder who Dumbledore got — Ron, what’s going on?”

Ron was staring down at his parchment, mouth half-open, face utterly shocked. He looked, strangely, a bit like Lily had after the dementor had nearly kissed her, though not quite so near death.
“What’s the matter?” George moved past Harry and snatched the letter from Ron. His mouth fell open, too. “Prefect? *Prefect*?”

Fred snatched the envelope and shook out a scarlet and gold badge. “No way. There’s been a mistake.” He took the letter from George and read it through. He held it up to the light, like he might be able to tell if it had been forged or not.

“No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect,” said George. He stared at Harry, and Harry knew they were thinking what Harry had thought the moment he saw the red and gold badge slide into Fred’s hand.

“We thought Dumbledore was bound to pick you,” said Fred. “Winning the Triwizard and everything!”

“Suppose all the mad stuff counted against him,” George said with a grin.

“Yeah,” Fred sighed. “Wish we’d taken bets on this. We’d have a right fortune. Well, a right second fortune.”

George walked back to Harry and clapped him on the shoulder. “At least one of you’s got your priorities right.”

Fred dropped the badge back into Ron’s hands. “*Prefect*. Ickle Ronnie the prefect.”

“Mum’s going to be revolting,” George groaned, and dropped his head onto Harry’s shoulder.

Ron still looked like he did not quite believe what was in his hands was real. He looked up at Harry and Neville, expecting them to disagree. Neither said anything, and Ron passed the badge to Harry. It was indeed a prefect badge, just like the one Percy had worn when Harry had first arrived at Hogwarts. He passed the badge to Neville, who looked at it with as much wonder as Ron had.

The door burst open and Hermione rushed in. “Did you — did you get — ?”

She stopped when she saw the badge in Neville’s hand. “Oh — Neville, you got — Well, I suppose Harry and Ron do get into quite a bit of trouble.”

Neville went bright pink and shoved the badge at Ron. “No, it’s not mine, it’s Ron’s.”

The bit of confusion that had begun to clear when Neville denied the badge returned in full-force as Ron took it back. “Ron?” Her head swung between Harry and Ron, like she was waiting for one of them to tell her they were joking, teasing her or Neville. “Are… you sure, I mean —”

Ron’s shock vanished in a moment. He looked up at her with a frown. “It’s my name on the letter.”

Hermione quickly went red. “That’s well done, Ron, really, it’s —”

“Unexpected,” said Fred.

“No!” Now Hermione’s ears were as red as her cheeks. “It’s not. Ron’s done loads of… he’s really….”

Mrs. Weasley came in with her arms full of freshly laundered robes. She dumped them onto Ron’s bed and began sorting through the laundry. She looked at the boys standing around with letters in their hands and said, “Ginny said your booklists had come at last. If you give them to me, I’ll take them over to Diagon Alley this afternoon and get your books while you’re packing.” She picked up
a pair of blue and white striped pajama pants and said, “Oh, Ron, I’ll have to get you new pajamas as well. These are at least six inches too short! I can’t believe how fast you’re growing. What color would you like?”

“Get him red and gold to match his badge,” said George.

“Match his what?” Mrs. Weasley hardly seemed to be paying attention, and honestly, Harry didn’t blame her. Half of what the twins said at any given time was useless at best.

“His badge,” Fred said. Then, he took a deep breath and said in a rush. “His lovely shiny new prefect’s badge.”

Mrs. Weasley set down a pair of navy blue socks on Neville’s bed and turned around slowly. “His…? Ron, you’re not…?"

Ron handed his prefect badge to his mother. Mrs. Weasley shrieked loudly.

“I don’t believe it! Oh, I don’t believe it — Ron, how wonderful! A prefect! That’s everyone in the family!”

George wrinkled his nose. “What are Fred and I? Next-door neighbors?”

But Mrs. Weasley hardly seemed to hear him as she pushed him aside to pull Ron into one of the tightest hugs Harry had seen her give, and that said a lot, given Mrs. Weasley’s hugs.

“Wait until your father hears! Ron, I’m so proud, what wonderful news, you could end up Head Boy just like Bill and Percy, it’s the first step! Oh, what a thing to happen in the middle of all this worry, I’m just thrilled, oh, Ronnie!”

“Get a grip, Mum,” Ron said, and tried to wriggle out of his mother’s grasp, but she was holding him too tightly, kissing his very red face.

“Well, what’ll it be?” she asked, and finally let go of him. “We gave Percy an owl, but you’ve already got one, of course.”

“W-what?”

“You’ve got to have a reward! How about a nice new set of dress robes?”

Fred crossed his arms over his chest. “We already bought him some.”

“A new cauldron?” Mrs. Weasley suggested. “Charlie’s old one is rusting through, or maybe a weasel. I know you were fond of Scabbers.”

“Could I…” Ron hesitated, like he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to ask, but he swallowed and tried again, “Could I have a new broom?”

Harry watched Mrs. Weasley try and fail to hide her disappointment. He didn’t blame her. Brooms did not come cheap.

“Not a really good one!” Ron said quickly. “Just… just a new one, for a change.”

It took Mrs. Weasley a moment, but she smiled and hugged him again. “Of course you can. Well, I’d better get going if I’ve got a broom to buy, too.” She took the letters from each of them. “I’ll see you all later. Be good while I’m gone — listen to Regulus and Remus — Little Ronnie, a prefect! Oh, and don’t forget to pack your trunks…. A prefect! Oh, I’m all of a dither.”
She kissed Ron on the cheek one more time, then hurried out of the room.

“You don’t mind if we don’t kiss you, do you, Ron?” asked Fred, voice higher than usual.

“We could curtsy, if you like,” offered George.

“Shut up,” Ron said.

“Or what? Going to put us in detention?” Fred grinned.

“I’d love to see him try,” said George.

“He could if you don’t watch out!” Hermione said, which only prompted Fred and George into a fit of laughter.

“We’re going to have to watch our step with these two,” said Fred, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Our law-breaking days are finally over,” George said.

And they Disapparated with a crack.

“Those two!” Hermione stared up at the ceiling. “They’re just jealous.”

“I don’t think so,” Ron said with a frown. “They’ve always said only prats become prefects.”

“I think it’s really great, Ron,” said Neville. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Neville,” Ron said, still looking at his badge, a bit of his initial wonder creeping back into his eyes. “I wish I could go with Mum and choose my broom... She’ll never be able to afford a Nimbus, but there’s the new Cleansweep out, that’d be great... Yeah, I think I’ll go tell her I like the Cleansweep, just so she knows.”

Ron left quickly, badge still clutched in his hand.

“Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Congratulations, Hermione,” Harry said, trying to sound as positive as he thought he should be.

“Thanks, er — Harry, could I borrow Hedwig to tell my mum and dad? They’ll be really pleased — I mean, prefect is something they can understand —”

“No problem.” His voice sounded painfully false, and Harry briefly wished he’d grown up with better liars so maybe he could actually be one. “Take her.”

Harry fussed with the robes Mrs. Weasley had left on his bed while Hermione called Hedwig down from her roost above the wardrobe. The door closed behind her, leaving Harry with Neville. Harry found himself wishing Neville might find an excuse to leave, but Neville wasn’t the sort who could tell when someone wanted to be alone.

“D’you want me to go, Harry?” Neville asked.

“No — I’m alright, really, why would you —” Harry couldn’t quite finish the lie and shoved socks into his trunk so he wouldn’t have to look at Neville.

“It really could’ve been you just as well, you know,” said Neville. “You’re both really great, and good at school, and you do lots of brave stuff. Maybe Dumbledore thought you had too many
“I said I’m fine, Neville,” Harry snapped. His scar was throbbing, he wished Neville would leave, and he wished Dumbledore had made him prefect over Ron. None of those things, however, were worth sulking over, and none of those things were worth losing his friendship with Neville or Ron over. But like with his parents, Harry couldn’t seem to find the words to apologize.

That night, after Mrs. Weasley had returned from Diagon Alley, she turned the usual dinner into a proper feast. She hung a banner over the dinner table that read, “Congratulations Ron and Hermione — New Prefects.” She baked more food than Harry had seen all summer, and seemed happier than Harry had seen her all summer, even more than she’d looked to hear his hearing had gone well.

“I thought we’d have a little party instead of a sit-down dinner,” Mrs. Weasley said as the children trooped into the kitchen. “Your father and Bill are on their way, Ron. I’ve sent them both owls and they’re thrilled.”

Their usual numbers were joined by Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Mad-Eye Moody even came shortly after seven.

“Alastor, I’m glad you’re here,” said Mrs. Weasley, and she took Mad-Eye’s cloak. “We’ve been wanting to ask you for ages — could you have a look in the writing desk in the drawing room and tell us what’s inside it? We haven’t wanted to open it just in case it’s something really nasty.”

Moody sat down at the table, but his magical eye swiveled around until it settled on a spot above the kitchen’s ceiling. “Drawing room… Desk in the corner? Yeah, I see it, yeah it’s a boggart. Want me to go and get rid of it, Molly?”

“No, no, I’ll do it myself later. You have your drink,” she said, knowing he only drank from his own personal hip-flask. “We’re having a bit of a celebration, actually.” She gestured to the banner. “Fourth prefect in the family!”

“Prefect, eh?” Moody turned to look at Ron, but his magical eye turned somewhere inside his own head, and Harry had the strangest feeling it was directed at him.

“Congratulations. Authority figures always attract trouble, but I suppose Dumbledore thinks you can withstand most major jinxes, or he wouldn’t have appointed you.”

Ron awkwardly thanked Mad-Eye for the congratulations. He didn’t look too keen on the rest of the speech, however, and quickly moved to greet his father and Bill, who had just arrived, with Mundungus Fletcher between them. Mundungus wore a heavy coat, pockets clearly full and he declined when Mrs. Weasley asked if he’d like hang it with Moody’s.

Regulus was seated at the head of the table with Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, and he watched Mundungus closely, like he was afraid Mundungus would unload his pockets in some corner of the house.

“I wasn’t a prefect myself,” Mrs. Longbottom was saying. “I was too busy with Dueling Club, anyway. Wouldn’t have had the time or care to shepherd around first years.”

Sirius walked past them and mussed Regulus’s hair in a strangely brotherly fashion. “Reg here was. Star student, star Prefect — Head Boy, too, weren’t you?”

Regulus looked up at Sirius, displeasure etched in every line on his face. “I was.”
Harry noticed the empty wine glass in Sirius’s hand and thought the unusually affectionate exchange made a little more sense. He decided he didn’t want to be nearby if Sirius ruffled Regulus’s temper while in such high spirits.

He passed Tonks, who had long red hair today, looking strangely like the middle child in a Lily-Tonks-Ginny lineup. She was, in fact, standing between Lily and Ginny, so Harry wondered if she’d done it on purpose.

“Congratulations, Hermione,” Lily said. “I was prefect in my day, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if you make Head Girl, either. James and I were Head Boy and Girl, you know.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Potter.”

“I never was a prefect,” Tonks said, as if she’d noticed the irritation Harry was trying so desperately to hide, “because Professor Sprout told me I lacked certain necessary qualities.”

“Like what?” asked Ginny.

“The ability to behave myself.”

Ginny and Harry laughed, though Hermione didn’t seem to find the story funny.

Lily laughed too, and said, “That was James, certainly.”

“I thought you said that you and Mr. Potter were Head Boy and Girl,” Hermione said.

“Yes, James was Head Boy, but Remus was the prefect for their year, actually.”

“Ah,” Remus said, joining them now that he had a plate of food, “I remember getting my letter just before seventh year, a little disappointed I hadn’t gotten Head Boy, but thinking it must’ve gone to Tyler Yeats in Ravenclaw. Imagine my surprise when I show up at the Hogwarts Express to see James wearing the badge proudly on his chest. I won’t lie, it was about three weeks before I finally decided he hadn’t stolen it for a joke.”

Sirius, pink-cheeked, bottle of wine in hand now instead of a glass, came up to them and leaned against Remus. “Remus won’t tell you the story of why though.” He took a bite of food off of Remus’s plate, and despite Remus trying to push him away and shush him, Sirius said, “They had a fight, third week of school, where Remus docked James five points for letting me copy his Potions essay. James protested, and it escalated way more than usual. I think Remus here was finally starting to believe the Head Boy thing and was getting jealous.”

“I wouldn’t—” Remus protested, moving his plate out of Sirius’s reach. “And you’re very drunk. Go sit down.”

“I’m fine! I’m just celebrating. Ron and Hermione are going to be prefects, I get my room back, and we don’t have to share with my brother—”

Before Sirius could finish his story, Mundungus Fletcher walked past them and took the wine bottle from Sirius’s hands.

“Hey, I was working on that!”

Sirius, though much taller than Mundungus, struggled to retrieve the bottle.

“You’ve had enuff, mate, let me,” Mundungus protested, trying to pour the bottle into a goblet.
Remus took a large bite of his dinner before handing the plate to Lily. “I ought to get him to bed before he gets into real trouble.”

The scene Sirius made as Remus forcibly escorted him out of the kitchen was hilarious in itself, but Harry was left with a burning desire to know the rest of that story. “Mum, do you know what happened?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Lily said, still laughing at Sirius. “I’ve never heard that story before. You’d have to find your father and ask.”

Harry looked around the crowded kitchen for James, and he saw Ginny doing the same, but as tall as James was, the kitchen was just too full of people.

He slipped away from his mother, Tonks, Ginny, and Hermione to see if he could find his father. He passed Mrs. Weasley and Bill, having their usual argument about Bill’s hair.

“It’s getting really out of hand, and you’re so good-looking, it would look much better shorter, wouldn’t it, Harry?”

Harry, not about to be dragged into that conversation, pretended not to hear her and took the first excuse away from her that he saw — Fred and George talking in a corner with Mundungus.

Harry noticed that as he got closer, Mundungus stopped talking. His cheeks burned, wondering what they could possibly be saying about him, but Fred winked at him and motioned him closer.

“Harry’s alright, Dung,” Fred said. “We can trust him. He’s our financier.”

“Look what he’s got us.” George opened his hands, revealing shriveled black pods with something rattling inside. “Venomous Tentacula seeds. We need them for the Skiving Snackboxes, but they’re a Class C Non-Tradeable Substance so we’ve been having a bit of trouble getting hold of them.”

“Ten Galleons the lot then, Dung?” asked Fred.

“Wiv all the trouble I went to to get ‘em?” Mundungus took a sip from the wine bottle he’d stolen from Sirius. “I’m sorry, lads, but I’m not taking a Knut under twenty.”

Fred nudged Harry with his elbow. “Dung likes his little joke.”

“Yeah,” George laughed, “his best one so far has been six Sickles for a bag of knarl quills.”

“Be careful,” Harry said.

“What? Mum’s busy cooing over Prefect Ron, we’re okay.”

“Moody could have his eye on you.”

Mundungus looked over his shoulder to where Moody was seated at the table with Neville. “Good point, that. Alright, lads, ten it is, if you’ll take ‘em quick.”

“Cheers, Harry,” Fred said, after Mundungus’s pockets had been emptied into his and his brother’s hands. “Better get these upstairs.”

Harry remembered he was supposed to be looking for his dad, and stood on his tiptoes to see if he could find James. He saw him talking with Ron, both looking so excited they could only be talking about brooms, but before Harry could start towards them, someone touched his arm.
“What was that about?”

Harry turned, expecting to see Mr. Weasley, or an inquisitive adult at his elbow, but it was only Cedric.

“Just a business deal,” Harry said, and smiled.

Cedric raised his eyebrows and handed Harry one of the two butterbeers in his hand. “Business with Mundungus? No wonder you didn’t make prefect.”

“Everyone has to engage in a little criminal activity now and again,” Harry said, and opened the warm bottle.

“Did you lose our Triwizard winnings on illegal betting? That’s oddly — Harry, I’m joking, don’t look so shocked —” But Cedric’s eyes followed Fred and George as they left the kitchen. “You gave them the winnings.”

Harry paused, wondering if Cedric was trustworthy or not. It was, technically, half Cedric’s money. “Yeah. Is that alright? Don’t tell Mrs. Weasley.”

Cedric shook his head. “I wouldn’t dare. Besides, how could I ruin what a wonderful day she’s having?”

Harry looked across the room to where Mrs. Weasley was moving between guests, making sure everyone had enough food and pausing to kiss Ron’s cheek when she passed him.

“... why Dumbledore didn’t make Potter a prefect?” Kingsley said, deep voice carrying despite the noise.

Harry froze, butterbeer halfway to his lips. He didn’t want to listen, but….

“I said the same thing when I saw Cedric didn’t get Head Boy,” Mrs. Diggory said. “It would’ve been nice to support those two.”

“I’m sure Dumbledore has his reasons,” Mr. Diggory said. “Besides, Ced’s a Triwizard Champion. What’s Head Boy compared with that?”

Harry turned back to Cedric. “You didn’t get Head Boy?”

Cedric’s smile was wry, and he took a sip of his butterbeer before answering. “No, I didn’t. Mum threw a right fit when she got home from work. Thought I deserved it, what with the Triwizard Tournament and all. She only calmed down when I told her I didn’t want it anyway.”

“Were you telling her the truth?”

“I was,” Cedric said. “Head Boy’s a lot of work. I don’t really feel up to it.”

Harry wondered if Dumbledore thought Harry was going through too much to be a prefect, that it was a position with more demands than Harry could meet.

“You alright not getting prefect?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah, fine.” At least, he was feeling a lot better about it now than he had that morning.

“I’m sure Dumbledore has a good reason,” Cedric said, sounding oddly like his father.
“Sure.” Harry took a sip of his butterbeer. “I’m actually trying to catch my dad, but….”

Cedric made no protest as Harry slipped away and back into the crowd of guests. He made his way towards Ron and James, but he was no longer particularly interested in the story Sirius had left unfinished. He thought he’d rather be upstairs in bed, but that sounded a lot like sulking, and he’d already told himself he wasn’t going to sulk.

As he reached them, James squeezed Harry’s shoulder in a brief hug while Ron prattled on about his new Cleansweep. James was listening intently, nodding in approval of each detail Ron described. It was no Nimbus, certainly not a Firebolt, but there was nothing really wrong with a new Cleansweep. They were good, sturdy models, and Harry, despite his exhaustion, irritation, and throbbing headache, was happy for Ron.

Mrs. Weasley came by and kissed Ron’s cheek for a final time. “I’m going to sort out that boggart and get some sleep. Don’t stay up late. Good night Ron, Harry, James — Arthur,” she called across the room, “make sure the kids are in bed at a reasonable hour, please.”

Harry wondered if it would be alright if he followed her. It did, though, feel weird to go to bed before Cedric, who was always the last one awake and the first to go back to bed. He decided in the end that he was simply tired, and under the pretense of refreshing his butterbeer, escaped James and Ron’s conversation.

He left his empty butterbeer bottle on the kitchen counter and started for the door, but he didn’t get very far.

“What, Potter?” Moody asked as he passed.

“Just fine. A bit tired.”

“Come here, I have something that might interest you.”

Harry certainly did not want to stop and chat with Mad-Eye, but before he could formulate an excuse, he accidentally made eye contact with Neville who was desperately pleading not to be left alone with Moody. Harry had abandoned Neville the last time Moody had taken a private audience with him, and Harry could not bring himself to abandon Neville a second time. He reluctantly sat down with them.

“I was just showing Longbottom here the original Order of the Phoenix.” Moody slid an old photograph towards Harry. “Found it last night when I was looking for my spare Invisibility Cloak, seeing as Podmore hasn’t had the manners to return my best one. Thought people might like to see it. There’s me,” Moody pointed entirely unnecessarily. Though the Moody in the photograph still had a nose and two eyes, he looked otherwise unchanged. “And there’s Dumbledore next to me… Diggle there…. That’s Marlene McKinnon. She was killed two weeks after this was taken. Classmate of your mother’s…. Frank and Alice are there, next to Fabian and Gideon, the four Aurors that came with me when we joined up…. Emmeline Vance, you’ve met her…. there’s Sirius — short hair, eh? — and your parents, of course…. Edgar Bones, brother of Amelia Bones. They got him and his family, too. He was a great wizard.” Moody prodded the photo with his finger and those in the front moved towards the back, so Harry could see an entirely new set of people — though he wasn’t sure he wanted to; he suddenly understood Neville’s panic at being alone with Moody.

“Sturgis Podmore, blimey, he looks young…. Caradoc Dearborn, vanished six months after this, we never found his body…. Hagrid, of course, looks exactly the same as ever…. Elphias Doge, you’ve met him…. I’d forgotten he used to wear that stupid hat. That’s Dumbledore’s brother,
Aberforth. I only met him this one time, strange bloke…. That’s Dorcas Meadows, Voldemort killed her personally…. Ah, and there’s Pettigrew and Lupin. Pretty interesting, eh?”

Interesting was one word for it. Everyone in the photo looked about as old as Harry felt. That made it all the more terrifying. So many of them had died, so shortly after the photograph was taken. Moody had been left scarred, Fabian Prewett without an arm. Harry looked up at Neville and he felt like they were, for once, on the same page. It was no wonder their parents wanted them uninvolved with the Order of the Phoenix and were so determined to protect them. It was the sort of thing Harry would have loved to have been told five years ago, when he still wasn’t sure what his scar meant and was trying to put the pieces of the old war together. But now, standing on the edge of a new war, he just felt sick to his stomach.

“What’s that you got there, Mad-Eye?” James asked, coming up behind Harry. He picked the photograph up off the table. “Goodness, I haven’t seen this in ages. Lils, Lils, come look at this.”

Harry took the opportunity to slip away and out of the kitchen. There was no part of him that had the ability to rejoin the party, not after that picture. He started upstairs, but sobs coming from the first floor kept him from going all the way up to his room. He frowned and followed the sounds to the drawing room, wondering who it was, and if they were alright.

“Hello?” he called, as he pushed the drawing room open.

There was no answer, but Harry saw Mrs. Weasley seated on the edge of the couch, sobbing, silhouette hazy in the light of the waxing moon, but clearly with her wand out, pointed at the figure on the floor. In the light from the hallway, Harry had no trouble seeing Ron, sprawled on the rug, dead.

Harry felt like he’d been plunged into the Black Lake. After everything he’d just heard Mad-Eye say, to see Ron dead, here — then reason returned and reminded him that Ron was downstairs, at his own party.

“Mrs. Weasley?” Harry asked, still short on breath.

“R-r-riddikulus!” Mrs. Weasley said, and pointed her wand at Ron’s body.

There was a crack, and Ron turned into Bill, as bloodied and dead as the image of his brother, eyes open and unfocused.

“R-riddikulus!” Mrs. Weasley tried again, but now Bill was Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley sobbed and again, and again, and again she tried to expel the Boggart. But the Boggart went from Mr. Weasley to the twins, to Ginny, to Charlie, to Percy, to Harry —

“Mrs. Weasley, just get out of here!” Harry said, wondering if he should step between her and the boggart, but then it might turn into a dementor, or worse, Lord Voldemort.

“What’s going on — ?”

James’s question cut off abruptly and Harry heard him whip his wand out of his robes. “Get back, Harry.”

“It’s only a boggart, Dad,” Harry said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

James got between Mrs. Weasley and the boggart and said, “Riddikulus,” but his voice cracked in the middle of the spell, and the image of Harry’s body, cold and dead on the floor, remained unchanged.
“Riddikulus,” James tried again, but with a crack, the boggart became Lily.

“Dad —” Harry tried, but was pushed aside again, this time by his living mother.

“Oh —” she started, but let the rest of what she might want to say die in her throat. “Riddikulus!”

Harry closed his eyes, not prepared to see himself dead twice in one evening, but he heard James let out a sigh of relief and Lily’s gentle voice soothing Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley’s sobs did not abate, instead growing louder, as if the fear had been keeping them at bay, and now they were free to flow unrestrained.

“Sh, Molly, it’s alright,” Lily whispered, letting Mrs. Weasley cry into her shoulder. “It was only a boggart, just a stupid, stupid boggart.”

“I see them d-d-dead all the time! I dream about it…. Don’t tell Arthur,” she said, mopping her eyes with her apron. “I don’t want him to know, being silly….”

James was careful to step around the carpet as he crossed the room back to Harry. “Alright, Snitch?”

Harry tried to say he was, then tried to shrug his shoulders, but couldn’t seem to do either. He remembered his nightmares from his first years at Hogwarts, of his mother screaming as Voldemort attacked her. He thought of all the faces in the photograph, dead, of the Weasleys, all dead, his mother and himself….

James pulled Harry into a hug. “You’re going to be fine. We’re going to be fine. I promise.”

But that seemed like a very empty promise to make.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Harry returns to Hogwarts, but things are not as they once were.

From this point onward, chapters are going to be fairly similar to their original counterparts, at least until we get to Quidditch, when James and Lily visit, and again at the holidays. I know I usually take one of two strategies in this chapter, but neither truly work for this book. I can't write letters, because Harry's mail is being read, and there is a lot he can't write home about. I could, possibly, write a chapter from someone else's perspective, but it feels strange to leave Harry in this book. He is going through so much, and no one else is quite having the same struggle. Except perhaps Cedric, but I don't want to reveal my hand on Cedric's story too early.

So, enjoy this lull. Things will still be hard for Harry, as they ever were, and chapters, I expect, will be as emotional as they have been, but the events will change in small ways. Enjoy!

Harry's last night of summer was no different from the others. He slept poorly, plagued by the usual bad dreams, this time with new images of Barty Crouch, Jr.’s body, dead at Voldemort’s feet, transforming into the bodies of his parents and friends, while Voldemort and his followers laughed coldly.

He woke sometime when it was still dark, but could not close his eyes again, knowing the moment he did, he would see his mother and father’s lifeless forms. Instead, he stared up at the dark ceiling for hours, wondering what the Order was really up to, and how much danger his parents put themselves in each day. If they didn’t think he was safe even at Hogwarts, how could he imagine they were safe here?

Though his thoughts were not much better than his dreams, at least he had a little bit more control awake than asleep. He kept up his staring contest with the dark void above his bed until morning broke, and Mrs. Weasley knocked on the door, demanding they get up and get breakfast, because she was not going to let them be late for the Hogwarts Express.

Harry obediently rolled out of bed and dressed. Neville and Ron took a bit more time getting ready and getting their things together, so Harry took it on himself to make sure Pigwidgeon was fed and watered. Harry expected he wouldn’t see Hedwig until tomorrow morning, after she’d finished her delivery to Hermione’s parents.

Once dressed, the boys started carrying their trunks downstairs. They didn’t get very far, however, because as soon as they stepped onto the landing, they were forced to press themselves against the wall to avoid being knocked over by Fred and George’s trunks, which were making a speedy flight
towards the ground floor.

Ginny, at the bottom of the stairs, wasn’t so lucky. As she leaned over to set Puck’s basket next to Crookshanks’s, she was knocked flat by Fred’s trunk.

Mrs. Weasley took up shouting at the twins for their carelessness and excessive use of magic. In response, Walburga Black’s portrait took up insulting the house's inhabitants, calling them the usual insults: blood-traitors, half-breeds, Mudbloods, and the like.

Sirius ran from portrait to portrait, alternating between shouting back at the images of his long-past relatives, or simply throwing curtains closed. Lily was right behind him, wand lifting everyone’s trunks down the stairs and to the front door at a much more reasonable pace than Fred and George had.

With nothing left to carry, Ron, Harry, and Neville trooped into the kitchen, where Hermione was already waiting, and Ginny had been set up with a cold cloth for her head.

“Alright?” Harry asked her.

“She said to hold this cloth he froze on it, then he’d fix it up.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s alright. Fred and George’ve caused worse accidents before.”

The boys grabbed toast and eggs and ate as quickly as they could manage. Sirius came in and with a tap of his wand the swelling on Ginny’s forehead was gone. It was a little red, but he promised that would go away in a couple of hours. Mrs. Weasley came in, a scolded Fred and George behind her, and started asking Ginny and Ron if they’d remembered everything.

“Your pajamas?”

“Yes,” they answered in unison.

“Toothbrush? Enough socks? Your winter things, too?”

“Yes, Mum, we’ve got everything,” Ron promised.

Neville jumped to his feet suddenly, “I forgot my birthday present!” and uncharacteristically dropped his toast and ran upstairs.

“Where’s Cedric?” Harry asked.

“He left already with his parents, and we ought to be going too, come on now.”

Harry was surprised by this, and even more surprised that the news hurt him. It seemed rather rude that Cedric would have just left without saying goodbye to everyone. Then again, they were all going to the same place, so maybe he just hadn’t thought it was all that important to wake people up to say goodbye. But why had he gone so early?

“Why’d Cedric go early?” Ron asked around a bite of eggs.

“None of your business. Now, hurry up. You’ll be Apparating to King’s Cross with your father and your sister.”

“Is it not our business ‘cause it’s Order business?” asked Fred.

“How come Cedric gets to go on Order business?” asked George.
“It has nothing to do with that.” Mrs. Weasley snapped so quickly Harry couldn’t be sure if she was lying or still just very angry with Fred and George.

James stuck his head through the kitchen door, hair messy as always, glasses slightly askew, “Mad-Eye says we ought to wait for Podmore, but it’s cutting it close, don’t you think?” he asked Mrs. Weasley.

Harry checked the watch on his wrist. It was only just past nine. If they were Apparating to King’s Cross, certainly that was plenty of time.

“You should probably go,” Mrs. Weasley said. “We’ll see you there.”

“Alright, Snitch,” James said to Harry, “finish up, let’s go.”

Harry took the toast off of his plate and followed his father upstairs. “Why are we going early?”

“Your Mum and I are walking you to King’s Cross.”

“What for? Can’t we Apparate?”

But as they stepped into the main hallway, it became impossible to talk over the screaming and howling portraits. Near the door, Sirius and Regulus were pulling the curtains closed over their mother’s portrait. Though her voice wasn’t the only one contributing to the din, it was certainly the loudest. When the brothers had finally wrestled her shut, the hallway’s noise level dropped to a sound slightly less than deafening.

Lily was waiting for them at the door. “Hurry up,” she called.

Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder as he passed. “Good luck this year. Study hard.”

Regulus shook Harry’s hand. “Be careful.”

Harry barely had time to reflect on weight of this statement before he was led out of the house and onto the sidewalk.

“We were supposed to leave twenty minutes ago,” Lily snapped at James.

“Mad-Eye wanted to wait for Sturgis,” he said.

His parents were walking so quickly, Harry found that even though he was nearly their height, he had trouble matching their stride. “What about my trunk?”

“Mad-Eye’s apparating everyone’s things,” James said.

“And why couldn’t we Apparate?” Harry asked. “You said the Trace was undetectable inside Grimmauld Place.”

“I did.” James looked at Harry with a quisitive smile, like he didn’t understand Harry’s train of thought. “We’d have to step outside the door to Apparate.”

“But Fred and George Apparate in there all the time.”

James’s face cleared. “Ah. This house has a convenient but long-forgotten charm that lets you Apparate within the building, but not in-to-out or out-to-in.”

“That’s really specific.”
“It is. It’s a lot easier to charm property to just forbid Apparition.”

“Like home and Hogwarts.”

“Exactly.”

“Ah, there she is,” Lily said, as they crossed the street.

Harry looked up at the corner on the opposite side but did not see anyone they recognized, only an elderly Muggle woman in a bright purple hat. As they passed her, though, the witch winked and said, “Wotcher, Harry.”

He grinned up at Tonks, but Lily ushered him on. “We can’t be late,” she said.

They were, fortunately, not late, although they cut it rather close. At 10:30, they crossed the barrier between Platforms 9 and 10. Their walk was only eventful in that Lily kept urging them to hurry. Harry did not even think anyone had followed them, but James and Lily kept looking over their shoulders like they were convinced otherwise.

“Did everyone else make it?” James asked.

“There’s Mad-Eye with the luggage,” said Lily, and she pointed across the platform to Alastor Moody, pushing a trolley with everyone’s trunks. His walk was uneven, due to his wooden leg, and he had a porter’s cap pulled down over his eyes, hiding his magical one.

“Don’t think we were followed,” he said, as James, Lily, and Harry began to help him unload the cart. Tonks had remained on the Muggle side of the platform.

Harry kept one eye on the magical entrance to the platform and the other on the train. Mr. Weasley came through with Ron and Ginny. A moment later, Remus came through with Fred and George, and Mrs. Weasley brought Hermione. After them, Alice Longbottom brought Neville, who was carrying a strange looking plant in his free hand. His other held tightly to his mother’s.

“No trouble?” Moody grunted as they arrived on the platform.

“None,” Remus answered. “Unless you count their bickering.”

“We can Apparate ourselves, you know,” Fred said.

Moody’s magical eye swiveled around the group, then disappeared into the back of his head. “I’ll still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore. That’s the second time he’s not turned up in a week. Still has my cloak…. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus.”

Lily pulled Harry into a tight hug. “You promise me you’ll be careful, won’t you?” she said, and Harry remembered the conversation he’d overheard her and James whispering in the middle of the night. Though they’d never brought it up to Harry that they’d considered taking him out of Hogwarts, he knew how terrified they were of letting him go back to school.

“I will,” Harry said. “Really, I’ll be fine.” He hugged his father goodbye.

“We’ll be at your Quidditch match, okay?” James said.

“All of you?”

“Weather permitting,” said Remus. “Be careful this year, alright? And do well in your O.W.L.s.”
“Watch what you put in writing,” Lily said. “We can’t know who’s reading letters.”

“And stay out of trouble,” James said. “I know it’s hard, but it’s a bad time to draw attention to yourself, okay?”

Harry felt like he’d never been sent off to school with so many cautions before, not even when his parents thought Regulus Black had escaped from Azkaban to kill him.

“I’ll be okay.”

Lily and James did not look convinced, but the train whistle blew, and there was no more time for warnings and reassurances.

As they boarded the train, Harry kept an eye out for Cedric, but he didn’t see him or his parents anywhere.

“We love you!” Lily called from the platform, and she, James, and Remus all waved goodbye to Harry.

Mrs. Longbottom and Mrs. Weasley were shouting similarly, promising to send on anything that had been forgotten, and Neville, Ron, and Ginny were each promising to behave. Fred and George waved, but made no such promises.

The train pulled out of the station, and the children continued waving to their parents. As they rounded the corner, Harry remembered he had not yet apologized to his parents for yelling at them. He promised himself he would put it in a letter as soon as Hedwig was back.

“We’ve got business with Lee,” Fred said. “Later.”

Hermione watched them go with a frown. Harry knew she didn’t approve of Weasley Wizard Wheezes, but he supposed Fred and George weren’t technically breaking any school rules, or she would have already scolded them.

“So,” Harry said, “shall we get a compartment?”

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking back at him with a wary expression. “Well — Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage.”

Harry looked to Ron for confirmation, or perhaps to protest, but Ron was very carefully avoiding Harry’s gaze.

“Right. Fine.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to stay there all journey,” Hermione said. “Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.”

“Sure. We’ll see you later then, maybe.”

“Definitely,” Ron said, finally looking up at Harry. “It’s a pain having to go down there. I’d rather — but we have to — I’m not enjoying it. I’m not Percy.”

“I know.” Harry grinned, and that seemed to give Ron the encouragement he needed to follow Hermione to the front of the train.

It was odd, watching them go. Harry had always ridden the Hogwarts express with Ron, and even though he was with Ginny and Neville, he felt strangely alone.
“Come on,” said Ginny, “if we hurry, we can save them seats.”

Harry and Neville followed Ginny down the train, peering through frosted windows into the carriage compartments. Everything looked full, and students stared back at Harry, nudging their friends. Harry remembered walking through the Ministry of Magic, though the students were far less subtle than the adults had been. He suddenly didn’t feel like sitting with anyone at all.

Harry let Ginny look for an empty compartment and pointed at the plant Neville was carrying. “What is that?”

“It’s called *Mimbulus mimbletonia*,” Neville said proudly. “It’s really rare, I don’t know if Professor Sprout even has one! My great-uncle Algie got it for me from Assyria for my birthday.”

“What’s it been all summer?”

“They need a lot of sunlight, so Mr. Black let me keep it on the roof.”

Harry stared at the plant, wondering what was so interesting about it. He knew Neville liked Herbology, but plants didn’t do anything. He supposed if it was rare, that was interesting. That still didn’t mean he understood why Neville was so excited about it.

“What’s it do?” Harry asked.

“Loads!” Neville said. “It’s got an amazing defense mechanism. Do you want to see it?”

“Er — maybe not in the corridor.”

By now they’d reached the back of the train and Harry was fairly certain there were no seats left. Then Ginny opened to door of the last compartment. It wasn’t empty — one student sat on a seat reading a magazine upside-down.

She lowered the magazine and looked up at them with wide, blue eyes.

“Hi, Luna,” said Ginny. “Is it okay if we take these seats?”

Luna looked over Harry, Ginny, and Neville like she was searching for some particular detail in each of their faces. Apparently satisfied with what she did or did not find, she nodded.

“Thanks.”

The three of them shuffled in and took their seats. Harry tipped his head to read the title of Luna’s magazine — *The Quibbler*. He’d heard of it before, but he wasn’t sure what it was specifically. Magazines weren’t really a commodity in the Potter home. Occasionally, Sirius picked up Muggle magazines about motorbikes, and James has a subscription to *Home and Herbology*. Otherwise, their source of information about the world had come from the *Daily Prophet*, at least until recently.

“Had a good summer, Luna?” asked Ginny.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Daddy and I went birdwatching. We saw an oozlefinch. It was quite sad, actually.”

“What’s an oozlefinch?” asked Harry.

“They’re featherless birds that fly backwards, but they’re native to North America, so it must have been brought here illegally. Sad.”
Harry did not know what to say. Neville and Ginny didn’t seem to either, but Luna didn’t seem to mind their speechlessness. She returned to her magazine without further question.

The door to their compartment opened, and Harry looked up at Cho Chang, looking very pretty with her straight dark hair hanging loose around her face, and wearing a floral-print Muggle dress. His stomach did several somersaults as he searched for the right words you would use to greet someone. Luckily, Cho remembered them.

“Hi, Harry.”

“Hi,” he said, wishing he didn’t sound so much like an echo of her. He tried to remember how to engage in conversation.

“Had a good summer?”

“Yes, alright. You?”

“Yes, alright.”

There was a very long pause in which Harry searched for something to say, but he could not understand why communicating with others was suddenly so difficult.

“Well… just thought I’d say hello. Bye, then.”

Cho closed the door to the compartment, face about as red as Harry’s felt. He stared at the door for a long moment, trying to pick apart every detail of that conversation. He did not feel like it had gone particularly well, and of course now that she was gone, Harry thought of a dozen things he could have said to her. He could have asked her about the Quidditch season, he could have asked her if she’d gotten practice on her broom, he could have asked what she did this summer, he could have told her he fought off a couple of dementors — that, surely, was fairly impressive.

He finally tore his eyes away from the door to find Ginny poorly hiding a very wide grin.

“What?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” she said, and looked out the window, smile still firmly in place.

Not too long ago, Ginny had been fairly obvious with her crush on Harry. She had gone red-faced every time he spoke to her, spilled her drink if he sat beside her, or stammered out words if they were in the same room. This last year, however, she had gotten much better. She was no longer shy around Harry. In fact, she was getting quite bold, particularly the other night when she’d demanded to join them in their quest for information about what the Order was up to. Harry had thought maybe she was only growing up, because of course it would get easier to talk to your crush as you got older. But here he was, floundering like a dying Grindylow in front of Cho Chang, though he was older than Ginny. Did that mean Ginny had gotten over her crush on him?

Cho’s dating Cedric Diggory, he remembered, and realized that probably should have been his first thought when he saw her. But it was closely followed by, She didn’t come looking for Cedric; she came looking for you.

Though still fairly flustered from his poor conversation, Harry felt a lot better with the knowledge that Cho had come to talk to him. He wondered vaguely where Cedric was, but even that question seemed frivolous compared to the knowledge that Cho had come to find him on the Hogwarts Express.
By the time Ron and Hermione had found them, the trolley witch had already come by with her wares, and Neville, Ginny, and Harry were swapping Chocolate Frog cards. Ron collapsed in a seat and swiped a Pumpkin Pasty from Ginny.

“I’m starving,” he said, and ripped open the packaging.

Hermione sat down wearily as well, and gratefully took the Chocolate Frog Harry offered her. “There are two fifth-year prefects from each house,” she said, and Harry guessed from her displeasure what was coming.

“Guess who Slytherin is,” Ron said, eyes closed, like he was hoping the taste of the Pumpkin Pasty might make up for the bad news Harry already knew was coming.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, all joy about Cho now washed away.

“And that complete cow Pansy Parkinson,” said Hermione as she handed the Chocolate Frog card to Harry. “How she got to be a prefect when she’s thicker than a concussed troll….”

“Who else?” asked Neville.

“Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott for Hufflepuff,” said Ron.

“Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw,” said Hermione.

“You went to the Yule Ball with Padma Patil,” Luna said, looking up at Ron over her Quibbler.

Ron finished his Pumpkin Pasty. “Yeah, I know.”

“She didn’t enjoy it very much.”

“Yeah, I know that too.”

“She doesn’t think you treated her very well, because you wouldn’t dance with her. I don’t think I’d have minded,” she said, looking up at the ceiling now. “I don’t like dancing very much.”

Ron and Harry both looked up at the ceiling, thinking they might find whatever Luna was looking at, but there was nothing there. She retreated to her upside-down magazine, and the compartment was silent.

Ron did not seem to know what to make of Luna Lovegood. It was clear Ginny found her amusing, or perhaps immensely enjoyed her company, because she was having trouble suppressing laughter.

Ron gave up trying to make sense of Luna and checked his watch. “We’re supposed to patrol the corridors every so often, and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can’t wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something….”

“You’re not supposed to abuse your position, Ron,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, right, because Malfoy won’t abuse it at all.”

“So you’re going to descend to his level?”

“No, I’m just going to make sure I get his mates before he gets mine.”

“For heaven’s sake, Ron —”
“I’ll make Goyle do lines. It’ll kill him, he hates writing.” Ron raised his hand and pretended he was holding a quill. In a low voice, he said, “I… must… not… look… like… a… baboon’s… backside….”

Everyone in the compartment laughed, particularly Luna, who went into a fit of hysterics. Though Harry thought her reaction a bit absurd, it was a nice change from the first time he’d met Luna, on the train ride to Hogwarts two years earlier, when they’d been waylaid by dementors. She’d had a similar sort of fit, shaking uncontrollably, but that had been the horror of a dementor, and whatever bad memories haunted her. It was good to see her shaking with laughter this time.

In her fit, she let her magazine slide to the floor and Harry saw its cover more clearly now that it was rightside up. The art on the front depicted Cornelius Fudge in a poor cartoon rendering, recognizable only by his iconic lime green bowler hat. The caption read, “How Far Will Fudge Go to Gain Gringotts?”

The cover also advertised other articles to be found inside, such as “Corruption in the Quidditch League: How the Tornadoes Are Taking Control” and “Regulus Black: As Black as He’s Painted?”

“Could I have a look at this?” Harry asked, pointing at the magazine.

Luna nodded without taking her eyes off of Ron, still shaking from her laughter.

Harry flipped through the magazine until he found the article on Regulus Black. It was illustrated by a cartoon as poorly drawn as the one on the front. Harry would not have known it was meant to be Regulus Black if it had not been captioned. In fact, Harry thought it looked rather more like Snape, with his batlike black cloak, dark sneer, and straight black hair. It was missing Snape’s large nose, instead sporting a nose that was thinner though perhaps just as long, like a beak but from a different sort of bird. Beneath the picture, it read, “Regulus Black — Notorious Mass Murderer OR Vivacious Vampire?”

Harry read it twice to be sure it said “vivacious” and not “vicious,” then read it a third time to make sure it was in fact discussing Regulus Black, the same Regulus Black he’d spent his summer with. He was fairly certain Regulus Black was not a vampire, but curiosity demanded that he read the article.

_For fourteen years, Regulus Black has been believed guilty of serving the Dark Lord during the height of his power. His audacious escape from Azkaban two years ago has led to the widest manhunt ever conducted by the Ministry of Magic. None of us has ever questioned that he deserves to be recaptured and handed back to the dementors._

_BUT DOES HE?_

_Startling new evidence has recently come to light that Regulus Black may not have committed the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban. In fact, says Allie Avalon, of 14 Hyacinth Drive, Lichfield, Black may not have been in the country during that time._

“What people don’t realize is that Mr. Black became a vampire just before You-Know-Who’s height of power,” says Ms. Avalon. “This is why so many people believed him dead. It’s much easier as a vampire to simply fake your death and move. He moved to Romania, where I was finishing up studies on the vampiric community, and I recognized his picture the moment I saw him in the paper! He could not have done all the terrible things he was accused of, because we were having quite the party on the continent. I have written to the Minister of Magic and am expecting him to give Regulus Black a full pardon any day now.”
Harry thought Regulus had several vampiric tendencies and quite a few secrets, but he did not think actual vampirism was one of them. He wondered if perhaps the article was a joke, maybe all the articles were as absurd as that one. He flipped through and read the article on Cornelius Fudge and goblins. It was certainly just as ludicrous. Harry was prepared to believe Fudge was prejudiced against goblins, but he did not think it went so far as to poison the goblins nor to cook them in pies, as the article said.

Harry began to get an idea of why they didn’t get the Quibbler at home.

“Anything good in there?” asked Ron.

“Of course not,” said Hermione. “The Quibbler’s rubbish, everyone knows that.”

“Excuse me,” Luna said, dreamy voice suddenly rather cold, “My father’s the editor.” She held her hand out, and Harry returned the article.

Hermione flushed. “I — oh, well — it’s got some interesting… I mean, it’s quite….”

Luna opened the magazine back up and turned it upside down. She disappeared behind it, clearly done with Hermione and the conversation.

The compartment opened again, and Harry found himself hoping it was Cho, but it was certainly not Cho. Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry had vaguely expected Malfoy to come gloating — Malfoy seemed to find something to come gloat about every year; it was fairly annoying — but he’d hoped maybe this year Malfoy would be too busy showing off his new prefect status to others and might leave Harry out of it. It was far too much to ask for.

“What?” Harry snapped.

“Manners, Potter,” Malfoy said, “or I’ll have to give you a detention.” He looked an awful lot like his father, full of arrogant airs and smug smiles. “You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments.”

“Yeah, but you, unlike me, are a git, so get out and leave us alone.”

Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville laughed, and Malfoy’s lip curled back, a painful imitation of his father that sent a course of fury through Harry and made his scar burn.

“Tell me, how does it feel being second-best to Weasley, Potter?” he asked.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Hermione.

“I seem to have touched a nerve! Better watch yourself, Potter. Can’t expect Mummy and Daddy to bail you out of trouble all the time.”

Harry knew, as he had known when his parents exchanged similar words with Lucius Malfoy, that while Draco may have been referring to his trial, he was also referring to his narrow escape from Voldemort in the graveyard. He reached into his robes for his wand, but before he could draw it, Hermione was on her feet.

“Get out!” she shouted at the three of them.

Malfoy did leave, but he and his cronies were laughing as they did. Harry wondered if Crabbe and
Goyle even knew what they were laughing about, or if they were simply laughing because Draco was laughing.

“Let me have a frog,” Ron said, and Harry half-heartedly tossed a frog to Ron.

Hermione, though, understood what Draco had meant, and gave Harry a sympathetic glance. She looked like she wanted to offer some encouragement, but Harry quickly looked out the window. He pressed his forehead against the glass, letting it cool his scar. He did not close his eyes, knowing the familiar images of the graveyard and green flashes of light were waiting for him the moment he did. Instead, he watched the sun set over the green hills and waited for a glimpse of the lights of Hogwart in the dark night. The window, however, was fairly grimy, and though the moon was three-quarters full, its light was obscured by clouds.

“We’d better change,” Hermione said. She and Ron each got their prefect badges pinned to their chest. Ron took a moment to check his reflection in the window. Harry could not be sure if Ron was admiring how the badge looked or still trying to reconcile himself to the fact that he had been made prefect. Harry had to admit, he really expected that between the two of them, he would have been chosen over Ron.

Ron and Hermione left to supervise the students as they disembarked, leaving Harry with Ginny, Neville, and Luna. They stepped off together, and Harry stood on his toes, looking for Cedric. He saw him a ways off, ushering a group of first years towards a swinging lantern, and Harry realized something was very off.

The lantern was not as high as Harry was used to, and the voice that rang out, “First years! Line up over here, please! All first years to me!” was not familiar.

Harry looked over and saw Professor Grubbly-Plank gathering the first years to her. “Where’s Hagrid?”

“Dunno,” Ginny said. “Come on, we’re blocking the door.”

Harry wanted to talk to Cedric, ask why Cedric had left so early that morning, but Ginny took his hand and pulled him towards the carriages. They squeezed their way through the crowd, separated now from Neville and Luna. Harry kept his eyes on the crowd, searching for them, and for Ron and Hermione, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw unfamiliar movement. He turned and nearly stepped back in surprise.

The horseless carriages were no longer horseless. Well, there weren’t horses yoked up to them, they were only sort of horses. They were more reptilian, scalelike skin coating bone with no flesh in between. They had long dark mane, pointed heads like a dragon’s snout, and large black leathery wings that also might belong to a dragon. In the moonlight, they were rather eerie, and Harry could only gape at them.

“Alright there, Harry?” asked Neville, showing up with Luna.

“Yeah…. What do you reckon —”

“Hagrid’s got up to? Dunno,” Neville said.

That hadn’t been what Harry was going to ask. He was about to try again, but Ron and Hermione arrived. They, like Neville, Luna, and Ginny, did not react to the horses.

“Malfoy was being absolutely foul to a first year back there,” Hermione said. “I swear, I’m going to report him! He’s only had his badge three minutes and he’s already using it to bully people
worse than ever.”

Harry would very much like to see that report. Though he supposed, if it just went to Snape, then there wouldn’t be any consequences for Malfoy.

“What are those things?” Harry asked as another carriage approached.

“What things?” asked Ron.

“The horse things.”

Hermione and Ginny had climbed into the carriage and were waiting for Ron, Harry, Neville, and Luna.

“What’re you talking about, mate? I don’t see any —”

Harry grabbed Ron by the shoulder and pointed at the reptilian-dragon-horse, but Ron continued to give him a blank stare.

“You — you can’t see it? There, harnessed to the coach?”

Ron blinked at him. “They’re pulling themselves, like always. You feeling alright?”

“Er — yeah….” Harry thought perhaps Ron was joking with him, but Ron looked genuinely concerned as he climbed into the carriage.

“You aren’t going mad or anything,” Luna said in her dreamy voice. “I can see them too.”

That was not particularly encouraging. “Can you?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been able to see them ever since my first day here. They’ve always pulled the carriages. Don’t worry. You’re just as sane as I am.”

Luna climbed into the carriage, and Harry rubbed at the scar on his forehead. Luna’s sanity was not a standard he thought very high.

“S’alright, Harry,” said Neville. “I’ve seen them the whole time too.”

That, at least, was marginally encouraging. He followed Neville into the carriage and together they rode up to the castle.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
The Sorting Hat's New Song

Chapter Notes

It's been a day of a lot of ups and downs, and I don't know what tomorrow is going to look like, so I wanted to get this posted tonight. I got interviewed for the program at school I want to be in, and it went really well. Then I got in a car accident and my evening has been really stressful since. I'm alright, just anxious. I decided to sit down and edit tonight to relax, instead of doing it at my usual 6am on Friday before I go to work. You get the benefit of the chapter 8 hours early!

Special shout out to ageofzero, who always gives the best encouragements and is a wonderful soundboard when I feel like I don't know what I'm doing.

The carriage took the students up to the castle, drawn by either a skeleton-dragon-horse, or invisible magic. Harry hoped for his own sake it was the former. Though Neville and Luna’s reassurance that the creatures were real was somewhat comforting, it was not enough to convince him to bring it up with Ron and Hermione. The Daily Prophet was already calling him a nutter; he didn’t need his friends to start thinking it, too.

“Did everyone see that Grubbly-Plank woman?” asked Ginny. “What’s she doing back here? Hagrid can’t have left, can he?”

“I’ll be quite glad if he has.” Luna stared out the window, up at the lights of castle. “He isn’t a very good teacher.”

“Yes, he is,” said Harry, Ron, and Ginny.

Luna didn’t seem surprised, confused, nor offended by their defense of Hagrid. She was as neutral about their disagreement as if one of them had said they preferred toffee, though she didn’t care for it so much. “Well, we think he’s a bit of a joke in Ravenclaw.”

“You’ve a rubbish sense of humor,” said Ron.

Luna was not perturbed by Ron’s rudeness, neither. She merely stared at him in a pensive yet distant way that reminded Harry strangely of Regulus Black. They weren’t quite the same — perhaps it was Luna’s dream-like eyes that set her apart from Regulus’s somewhat predatory stare — but their gazes shared a unique passivity about the world that Harry had never seen on anyone else. They were distant, separated from the events happening around them, like a students taking notes from a mediocre professor. Not entirely disinterested, but certainly not concerned about what came next.

The carriage took them past the Forbidden Forest and up to the steps of the castle. They disembarked into a crowd of Hogwarts students, and Harry risked a glance at the carriage harnesses. Whatever creature he’d seen by the train platform was still here, pulling the carriages. Harry wondered if Luna and Neville were right, and they’d always been here. If that was the case, then why could he see them now? What had changed?
“C’mon, Harry,” Ron called from the steps.

Harry ran to catch up with Ron and Hermione. Ginny, Luna, and Neville had already drifted away from them, carried into the hall by the crowd of students.

The Great Hall looked as it ever did, House banners hanging over four tables, letting students know where to sit. Candles hovered above them in the open-sky ceiling, as gray and starless as the weather outside. Friends shouted at each other across the hall. A few girls who had missed each other on the train ride met each other at the Ravenclaw table with a loud shriek. Some students whispered as Harry passed them, or stopped their conversations abruptly. He remembered his parents’ attitude at the Ministry, though, and tried to mimic his father’s mild expression by pretending Ron had just said something rather funny. He felt like he looked like an idiot, though.

Luna was lost to the Ravenclaw table, and Ginny had moved farther down to sit with some girls from her dormitory. But they reunited with Neville, who had saved them seats. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were sitting across from him, and their quiet conversation ceased as Harry joined them.

“Good summer?” Lavender asked him with an overly friendly smile.

“Yeah,” Harry said, and half-considered bringing up that he had been attacked by dementors. He thought perhaps that would only make him sound worse to them. Instead, he tried to sound as falsely friendly as she did, though he was fairly certain his annoyance cut through anyway. “Fine, you?”

“Yes, it was nice.”

Parvati’s greeting was a little colder, but that probably had more to do with Harry being a terrible date at the Yule Ball than it did with anything the Prophet had written about him. Harry returned the chilly greeting with a false warmth he hoped his parents would be proud of, and turned his attention to the line of staff and teachers seated at the head table.

“He’s not there,” he said.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville all followed his gaze and scanned the table, but Hagrid was such a large figure, it was not as if they could have missed him.

“He can’t have left,” said Ron.

“No, I don’t think he has,” said Harry.

“He couldn’t be hurt or something, could he?” asked Neville.

“No, it isn’t that.” Harry glanced at Lavender and Parvati, to make sure they were sufficiently engaged in their own conversation, then whispered, “I’d bet he’s not back yet from the thing he was doing over the summer for Dumbledore.”

Hermione bit down on her lip and looked over the staff table again. Harry wasn’t sure what she was looking for. It wasn’t as if there was any posted reason for Hagrid’s absence.

“Who’s that?” she asked, and pointed at the center of the table.

Dumbledore sat at the center, as usual, and on his right sat Minerva McGonagall, though she was just getting up and heading for the side room attached to the Great Hall, where the new first years would be waiting. None of that was unusual.
Dumbledore’s left, however, a seat usually occupied by Professor Snape was instead filled by a woman Harry had seen once before. She wore a fluffy pink cardigan over her robes, and a matching bow in her hair. She was saying something to Dumbledore, who had to bend his ear towards her to hear her properly, she was so short and squat.

Harry frowned. “It’s that Umbridge woman.”

“Who?” Hermione did not seem to have expected anyone to answer her. Harry did realize it was odd that he knew something Hermione didn’t.

“She was at my hearing. She works for Fudge.”

“Works for… Fudge?” Hermione bit down on her thumb and seemed to be counting the staff table again. “What on earth is she doing… No, she couldn’t — surely not.”

“Nice cardigan,” Ron observed without any sincerity.

“She looks like my Great-Aunt Georgia,” said Neville, “after her daughter-in-law turned her into a toad. Her son never did quite get her to look right again.”

Harry knew Neville didn’t mean to be rude by it. He had only observed and spoken without thinking. But Harry found the statement horribly funny, and hid his laughter in his hand.

When he’d finished enjoying the idea that Umbridge had once been hexed into the form of a toad, he turned to ask Hermione what she looked so upset about as she glared down Dumbledore and Umbridge. But just as he opened his mouth, the doors of the Great Hall opened, and everyone went quiet. Professor McGonagall led in the crowd of new first years, carrying the very old and frayed Sorting Hat.

Harry looked over the first years, rather shocked by their smallness. He knew he hadn’t always been as tall as his parents, but had he really been as small as that? They looked terrified, too, and Harry did remember that feeling. He’d been worried about which house he would end up in, but it had come out alright. He’d been put into Gryffindor, just like his parents — but more importantly than that, he’d been put into Gryffindor with Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

Professor McGonagall set the hat down on a three-legged stool at the end of the table. A seam in its brim opened, and the hat began to sing.

In times of old when I was new
And Hogwarts barely started
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted:
United by a common goal,
They had the selfsame yearning,
To make the world’s best magic school
And pass along their learning.
“Together we will build and teach!”
The four good friends decided
And never did they dream that they
Might someday be divided,
For were there such friends anywhere
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Unless it was the second pair
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?
So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there and so can tell
The whole sad, sorry tale.
Said Slytherin, “We’ll teach just those
Whose ancestry is purest.”
Said Ravenclaw, “We’ll teach those whose
Intelligence is surest.”
Said Gryffindor, “We’ll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name,”
Said Hufflepuff, “I’ll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same.”
These differences caused little strife
When first they came to light,
For each of the four founders had
A House in which they might
Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin
Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning, just like him,
And only those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw
While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.
Good Hufflepuff she took the rest,
And taught them all she knew,
Thus the Houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.
So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,
But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.
The Houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.
And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with dueling and with fighting
And the clash of friend on friend
And at last there came a morning
When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died out
He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three
Have the Houses been united
As they once were meant to be.
And now the Sorting Hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into Houses
Because that is what I’m for,
But this year I’ll go further,
Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it’s wrong,
Though I must fulfill my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we’ll crumble from within.
I have told you, I have warned you….
Let the Sorting now begin.

There was a brief pause before the applause began. Uncharacteristic whispers spread across the Great Hall as many of the older students turned to their friends, asking the question that was on Harry’s mind as well.

“Branched out a bit this year, hasn’t it?” said Ron.

“I wonder if it’s ever given warnings before.” Hermione bit down on her lip. She looked positively unnerved, and Harry didn’t blame her.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” said Nearly Headless Nick, the patron ghost of Gryffindor, who had seated himself halfway in Neville.

Neville winced and tried to lean away, nearly knocking the second year beside him off the bench.

“The hat fels itself honor-bound,” Sir Nicholas continued, “to give the school due warning whenever it feels —” He stopped abruptly and put a finger to his lips. Professor McGonagall had picked up the sorting hat and was about to read the names of the first years.

She began with, “Abercrombie, Euan,” a small boy with white-blond hair and freckles. He stumbled forward and took a seat on the stool. McGonagall lowered the hat over his head and it was only his absurdly large ears that kept it from consuming him entirely.

The rip near the brim of the hat opened once more and said, “Gryffindor!”

The table beneath the scarlet banner cheered, and other tables clapped with them. There were a few boos from the Slytherin end of the table, as was traditional, but they were largely drowned out by the overwhelming applause.

Euan returned the hat to McGonagall and ran to the table, looking very much like he wanted to sink into his seat and never come back up again. It was clear he did not care for the attention. But the attention on him didn’t last terribly long, for McGonagall was already calling another name.

Down the list, Professor McGonagall went, calling each of the new students forward to go through their sorting. Harry knew his year was split evenly — ten students in each house — and he felt that this year of students was about the same. He wasn’t keeping an exact tally, but the hat did not seem to favor one house or the other. He wondered if there were ever years that some houses overwhelmed the others in terms of numbers. It would certainly make opportunities for house
points fairly uneven.

At the end of the list, Rose Zeller was sorted into Hufflepuff. As McGonagall cleared away the hat and stool, Professor Dumbledore stood, and the cheers for the final sorting died down. Harry’s stomach rumbled in the silence, and he was fairly certain his wasn’t the only one.

“To our newcomers,” Dumbledore said, “welcome!” He stretched his arms out, purple and silver sleeves hanging loose from his arms. “To our old hands — welcome back!” He had to pause for a brief cheer, largely led by Fred and George Weasley. “There is a time for speech making, but this is not it. Tuck in!”

Another cheer and applause, and as Dumbledore retook his seat, food appeared on the table.

Neville and Ron were the first ones to pile their plates with a fair bit of enthusiasm.

“What were you saying before about the Sorting Hat?” Hermione asked Nearly Headless Nick. She didn’t even touch the food, which Harry knew meant Hermione was very focused on solving a particular problem. In this case, it was that she wanted to know what the hat’s warning was about. Harry thought the answer to that question was fairly obvious: Voldemort.

“Oh, yes,” the ghost said. “Yes, I have heard the hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: Stand together, be strong from within.”

Ron said something in utter gibberish, real words obscured by his full face. Hermione and Nick stared at him, and Ron swallowed and tried again.

“How can it know if the school’s in danger if it’s a hat?”

“I have no idea,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “Of course, it lives in the Headmaster’s office, so I daresay it picks things up there.”

“And it wants all the Houses to be friends?” Harry looked across the hall to the Slytherin table, specifically Draco Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle as usual. “Fat chance.”

“Well, now, you shouldn’t take that attitude,” said Nick. “Peaceful cooperation, that’s the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate Houses, maintain links of friendships. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron.”

Harry thought it wasn’t really Slytherin he minded. Sure, he thought the idea of blood-purity rubbish, definitely didn’t like that they had beaten him in his last Quidditch match, and the Chamber of Secrets with its murderous basilisk was something of a blight on Slytherin’s legacy. But the concept of Slytherin as a house, Harry thought maybe it couldn’t be so bad. The Sorting Hat generally described them as cunning, quick-witted, and exceptionally good at finding solutions to difficult problems. The hat had even suggested he would fit well in Slytherin.

It was these specific Slytherins — and actually, every single Slytherin Harry had gotten to know during his time at Hogwarts — that made him wonder if house unity was really possible. He’d never be able to be friends with Draco Malfoy, never.

Even as he thought it, Harry remembered one of the several nights he’d spent in the hospital wing. He and Draco had gotten into a duel, as they seemed to at least once every year, and had ended up staying a night together under Madam Pomfrey’s care. They hadn’t talked much, but Harry had given Draco a Chocolate Frog card. He wondered if Draco still had that card, or if Draco still had
the letter from Remus that had come with the Chocolate Frog.

That, of course, had been before Remus had been outed as a werewolf to the school, thanks to Snape. That was also before Draco’s father had stood by and laughed while Voldemort had tortured Harry and threatened to kill him.

No, Harry did not think he could ever be friends with the Slytherins.

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, though, that was a different matter. The Ravenclaw table sat next to the Slytherin table, and Harry saw Cho Chang chatting with her girlfriends. He wondered what about. Were they exchanging summer stories? Were they excited about new classes this year? Was it about Quidditch? Was it about boys?

His stomach turned over once and he dragged his gaze away, one table closer, to Hufflepuff. He saw Susan Bones talking with Ernie Macmillan. Harry hadn’t spoken to either much since before they’d begun at Hogwarts. His parents were friends with Susan’s parents, connected by the Order and the murder of Edgar Bones and his family. He’d thought more than once that maybe he ought to talk to Susan about Voldemort, that surely she’d understand what he was going through, but he’d never quite gotten up the courage.

Susan glanced over at him, as if she had sensed him looking at her, and smiled. It was only a polite friendly smile, but it was encouraging nonetheless. Ernie Macmillan looked his way, too, and said something to Susan. Susan shook her head and reached for a treacle tart. Harry wondered what they were saying about him. Surely it wasn’t bad, not if Susan had smiled at him like that.

Harry continued scanning the Hufflepuff table until he found Cedric Diggory, sitting with the Quidditch team. Though he had just seen Cedric on the train platform, and they’d just spoken the night before, Harry felt like Cedric was suddenly farther away than ever. Cedric hadn’t looked at him once, hadn’t found him on the train like Ron and Hermione had, hadn’t apologized for leaving early without saying goodbye. Harry wondered if something had happened, but he couldn’t tell by looking at Cedric.

Cedric was still thin, with dark circles under his eyes like he hadn’t slept all summer — and he probably hadn’t — but he was smiling as one of the girls next to him lightly punched his shoulder. Harry wasn’t sure he’d seen Cedric smile honestly all summer. It was nice to see it now.

He felt a stab of jealousy that no one at the Hufflepuff table was giving Cedric sideways glances and strange looks. But Cedric didn’t have the notoriety that Harry did. Harry had been famous all his life, and Cedric had only recently been noticed by the Wizarding World when he’d been chosen for the Triwizard Tournament. Even that, though, had been overshadowed by Harry’s fame.

Harry thought, not for the first time in his life and certainly not for the last, it would be nice to not be so famous. It must be quite easy to be a normal student at Hogwarts, with no one glancing at your scar every time they spoke to you, or whispering rumors behind your back, or wondering if you were some hero worth worshiping.

It made Harry very glad for the friends he did have. For Ron, Hermione, and Neville, who had never treated him as anything more or less than what he was. For Fred and George, who had always regarded his fame as something of a joke. For Ginny, who in this last year had proven herself to be quite a good friend, just as funny, fierce, and formidable as each of her brothers.

The conversation in the hall began to quiet as students finished eating and exhaustion settled in. Harry was feeling full, too, but absent-mindedly picked at the vegetables on his plate until they vanished when Dumbledore stood.
Dumbledore walked to the podium, and the attention of all the students turned to him. “Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices. First years ought to know that the forest in the grounds is out of bounds to students — and a few of our older students ought to know by now too.”

Fred and George mimed shocked faces and placed horrified hands on their chests.

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four hundred and sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in the corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch’s door.

“We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

There was polite applause, as there always was for new Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, since they got a different one every year. In fact, Harry’s second year had seen two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers. But he was more concerned about what Dumbledore had said about Professor Grubbly-Plank, or rather, what he had not said. How long was she to be staying?

“Tryouts for the House Quidditch teams will take place on the —”

Dumbledore stopped, and Harry did not quite understand why. The Headmaster turned to Umbridge, and Harry realized she was standing. She was not much taller standing than sitting, so he hadn’t even noticed. He didn’t know how Dumbledore had noticed, until she cleared her throat with her gentle, “Hem, hem.”

Dumbledore stepped aside readily, as if he had not just begun to talk about Quidditch, and was certainly prepared for her to make a speech. The other members of the staff were far more openly surprised. It was not common for new teachers to make speeches, and some of the students murmured quietly to each other. A few even laughed — no one interrupted Dumbledore; this woman didn’t know what she was doing.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Umbridge said, in her high, girlish voice, “for those kind words of welcome.”

Harry did not know why, but as she spoke, a feeling in his stomach opened up, a feeling of utter loathing, comparable only to the intense hatred he felt during a Potions lesson. But Professor Snape had earned Harry’s hatred by being absolutely foul, singling Harry out, constantly criticizing him, all while giving Malfoy a pass for the same things. This woman had done nothing of the sort, yet Harry knew, beyond reason and doubt, that he absolutely loathed this woman. Yes, she had voted against him in his hearing, but so had Fudge, and Harry did not feel this hatred when looking at Fudge.

She cleared her throat again. “Hem, hem. Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say! And to see such happy little faces looking back at me!”

Harry knew his face didn’t look happy, and as he glanced around at his table, nor did his friends’ faces. Fred, George, and Lee, in particular, were staring at her with raised eyebrows, like they hadn’t quite decided whether they were going to hate her or milk her for all she was worth.

“I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I’m sure we’ll all be good friends.”
“I’ll be her friend as long as I don’t have to borrow that cardigan,” Parvati whispered to Lavender, and their giggles joined the scattered laughter around the room. Clearly no one was taking this woman seriously.

“Hem, hem. The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance.” Though her voice was still high and girlsh, it sounded less like she was talking to five-year-olds, and more like she was bringing a class of seven-year-olds to attention. Not much of a change, but enough that Harry noticed a difference.

“The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the Wizarding community must be passed down through the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.”

Harry wondered who exactly Umbridge was talking to. Certainly none of what she said was of any interest to him, and he didn’t think that was because he was just bad at listening to lectures. Her words were not just large, they sounded fairly repetitive, and Harry had the strangest sensation that if he tried to make deeper sense of them, they would only say something that could have been put into much simpler words, like she was intentionally clouding what she wanted to say.

Professor Sprout and Professor McGonagall, however, exchanged a brief but significant glance, and Harry did not understand why.

“Hem, hem. Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress’s sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation….”

Again, with her repetition. Harry could focus no more. He’d rather listen to Professor Binns drone on about goblin rebellions. At least those were bloody, and at least Binns didn’t say the same thing seven times in a row.

He looked around the Great Hall and noticed he was not the only one who had stopped listening. Draco Malfoy was probing something on the table with his wand while Crabbe and Goyle sniggered over his shoulder. Cho Chang had begun talking to her friends, and Luna had buried herself in her Quibbler once more. Ernie Macmillan appeared to be listening, but his eyes had long-glazed over. His straight posture was owed only to the Prefect badge on his robes he seemed very interested in living up to.

Cedric, however, was listening. His Quidditch team had started flinging either leftover peas or bits of tissue at each other using their forks as catapults, but Cedric was faced forward, eyebrows drawn together tightly. He was clearly trying very hard to listen to Umbridge, and he didn’t like what he was hearing.

Hermione looked just the same. She was biting down on the inside of her cheek, and Harry did not think she was only trying to look the part of a prefect. If Hermione and Cedric were paying attention, perhaps it was more serious than Harry thought, and he tried again to listen.

“... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved,
perfecting what can be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.”

Umbridge returned to her seat. Dumbledore clapped.

The staff table followed his lead, though they did not look pleased. The students clapped, belatedly, as they were pulled from their more interesting distractions, and quieted as Dumbledore returned to the podium.

“Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge.” He inclined his head to her. “That was most illuminating. Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held in one week….”

“It certainly was illuminating,” Hermione grunted, and Harry waited patiently for her to explain, because he certainly didn’t understand.

“You’re not telling me you enjoyed it?” Ron said. “That was about the dullest speech I’ve ever heard, and I grew up with Percy.”

“I said illuminating, not enjoyable. It explained a lot.”

“It sounded like a load of waffle to me,” Harry said. He glanced at Cedric, who was still paying rapt attention to Dumbledore.

“There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle.”

“Was there?”

“How about ‘progress for progress’s sake must be discouraged’? How about ‘pruning practices that ought to be prohibited’?”

“I don’t understand,” said Neville.

“It means the Ministry’s interfering at Hogwarts.”

Harry took a moment to let that sink in. He remembered the letter he’d gotten from Cedric Diggory over the summer, just after his dementor attack. He’d never thanked Cedric for the letter. It hadn’t been especially encouraging, but he realized now that since everyone else had failed to write him on Dumbledore’s orders, Cedric must have had to send it secretly, and risk it being read by someone else.

He didn’t remember all the details of the letter, but Cedric had implied that the Ministry was no longer trustworthy. What did that mean, then, to have them here at Hogwarts?

There was a good deal of noise around Harry, suddenly, and he realized they’d just been dismissed to their dormitories.

Hermione stood and waved her hand in the air. “First years! First years, over here please!”

Ron and Harry started towards the common room, but Hermione grabbed Ron’s sleeve.

“We have to show them where to go.”

“Oh, right.” Ron was a good deal taller than Hermione, and he stood on the bench to make himself even taller. “Hey — hey, you lot,” he motioned to the group of small children at the front of the hall, “Midgets, over here.”
“Ron!”

“Well they are. They’re titchy.”

“You can’t call them midgets!” Hermione pulled him down from the bench and got up herself. “First years! This way, please.”

The handful of students approached Hermione shyly. They seemed rather afraid of Ron, giving him odd looks, but they were comforted by Hermione’s pleasant smile. Euan Abercrombie was looking up at Hermione with wide brown eyes. An even smaller boy on his right whispered something in Euan’s ear, and Euan looked at Harry. His face changed into one of fear, and Harry decided he didn’t want to stick around anymore.

“I’ll see you later,” he said to Ron and Hermione, and trudged upstairs. Perhaps it was a good thing he wasn’t a prefect. If the students were more terrified of him by the scar on his face than by Ron calling them midgets, well, he certainly wasn’t up for the job.

Thanks to the Marauder’s Map, Harry knew most, if not all, of the castle’s secret passages and short cuts. While Ron and Hermione were taking the first years up the winding and moving staircases, Harry moved through hidden doors and empty passages. The alone time was nice, though he didn’t like how loud his thoughts were when he was alone.

He reached the familiar portrait of the Fat Lady long before Ron and Hermione. He looked up at her, sipping her goblet, and opened his mouth but found he didn’t have the password for this year.

“Er….”

“No password, no entrance,” she said.

“What’s the point in being famous if you won’t let me in my own common room,” Harry said dully.

“Harry, I know it!” Neville shouted from behind, and ran up the last few steps to reach him. “Guess what it is? I’m actually going to be able to remember it for once — Mimbulus mimbletonia!”

The Fat Lady nodded and opened for Neville and Harry. They climbed through the round entrance to their common room, which was, thankfully, the same as ever.

The fire was lit, already filling the room with a warm, sleepy atmosphere. Quiet conversations buzzed around the room as students lounged in comfortable armchairs. Angelina Johnson was at the notice board, arguing with Fred and George about something. Harry thought maybe he should say hello, but she looked rather furious, and Harry decided to talk to her tomorrow.

He and Neville went up the circular stairs to their dormitory. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan were already there, and the conversation stopped as soon as Harry entered. He tried to fight the frustration that boiled in his stomach, but it was a very difficult feeling to fight.

“Hi!” said Neville.

“Hey Neville, Harry,” said Dean. He was just pulling on his pajamas, decorated in the colors of some Muggle sports team Harry wasn’t familiar with. “Good holiday?”

“Fine,” Harry said, again deciding to spare the details. “You?”

“Yeah, okay. Better’n Seamus’s anyway. He was just saying.”
“What happened, Seamus?” asked Neville. He picked his new plant up from where it had been delivered from the train to his bedside table and moved it to the window.

Seamus waited a moment before answering. He pulled his shirt over his head and closed his trunk. Harry thought Seamus was trying to look at him without catching his eye, but he couldn’t be entirely sure.

Finally, Seamus said, as he adjusted his Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch poster, “Me mam didn’t want me to come back.”

Harry thought Seamus was a long time out of his robes when Seamus spoke and wasn’t sure he heard him right. “What?”

“She didn’t want me to come back to Hogwarts.”

“But — why?” Seamus’s mother was a witch, and Harry was fairly certain she had attended Hogwarts, too. Then again, so had Harry’s parents, and they’d considered not sending him back to Hogwarts.

Seamus, again took a long time to answer. When he finally spoke again, his voice was cautious, words carefully picked. “Well, I suppose… because of you.”

Harry was torn between two strong emotions. Empathy, because he knew what it was like to be unsure you would be returning to school, and anger, because what on earth did Seamus’s mother think would happen? Did she expect Harry to hex his roommates in the middle of the night? To conjure Voldemort in the common room? Things happened to Harry, he did not make them happen to others. Certainly nothing had ever happened to Seamus.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he snapped, settling on the latter emotion.

“It — it’s not just you, Dumbledore too —”

“She believes the Daily Prophet.” Harry folded his arms over his chest. “She thinks I’m a liar and Dumbledore’s an old fool?”

“Er — something like that, yeah.”

Harry pulled his pajamas on as quickly as he could. All he wanted was to go to sleep. He didn’t want to deal with this. He didn’t want to hear about the Daily Prophet again for the rest of his life. He felt so much anger, for Mrs. Finnigan, a woman he’d met only briefly at the Quidditch Cup, who had seemed incredibly pleasant, if a little passionate about the Irish National Quidditch team. He felt it at Seamus, too, for not defending Harry to his mother, for bringing it up here, in the dorm they all had to share together.

He got into bed, but before he could close his curtains, Seamus said, “Look — what did happen? That night, when, you know… after the tournament.”

It was the eagerness in Seamus’s voice that set Harry over the edge. It was the sort of curiosity a younger Harry might also have expressed, the sort of curiosity that wearied his parents when he pressed them about what had happened to give him his scar. It was the sort of curiosity that got him answers he had been unprepared for, answers he never wanted to know, about people who had died, were disfigured, were tortured….

“What are you asking me for?” he snapped at Seamus. “Just read the Daily Prophet like your mother, why don’t you? That’ll tell you all you need to know.”
“Don’t have a go at my mother!”

“I’ll have a go at anyone who calls me a liar!”

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“I’ll talk to you how I want!” Harry grabbed his wand from the bedside table. “If you’ve got a problem sharing a dormitory with me, go and ask McGonagall if you can be moved, stop your mummy worrying —”

Seamus, too, grabbed his wand. “Leave my mother out of this, Potter!”

“Hey — What’s going on?” Ron stood in the doorway, frowning at the two of them.

“He’s having a go at my mother!” said Seamus.

“What? Harry wouldn’t do that. We liked your mother.”

“That’s before she started believing every word the stinking *Daily Prophet* writes about me!” shouted Harry.

“Oh.”

“You know what?” said Seamus. “He’s right. I don’t want to share a dormitory with him anymore. He’s a madman.”

“That’s out of order, Seamus,” said Ron.

“Out of order, am I? You believe all the rubbish he’s come out with about You-Know-Who, do you? You reckon he’s telling the truth?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Even though Ron’s family was in the Order, working to stop Voldemort before he took power, it felt good to hear Ron vocalize his support of Harry. It wasn’t too long ago that Ron hadn’t stood up for Harry when the whole school had turned against him.

“Then you’re mad too,” Seamus said.

“Well, unfortunately for you, I’m a prefect, so unless you want a detention, watch your mouth.”

Seamus looked like he might take Ron up on that detention. A tiny part of Harry didn’t blame him. Draco Malfoy had once had a go at Lily, and Harry had started one of their worst duels, right in the Great Hall, in front of Professor McGonagall and everything. But the rest of Harry, the overwhelming majority of Harry, remained furious with both Seamus and his mother.

Seamus, though the anger on his face never cleared, said nothing more and got into bed. He wrenched his bed curtains closed with so much force, the curtains fell to pieces on the floor. Dean fixed them with a quick Repair Charm.

“Anyone else’s parents got a problem with Harry?” Ron asked, looking at Dean.

“My mum’s a Muggle, mate,” said Dean. “She don’t know nothing about no dark wizards at Hogwarts, because I’m not stupid enough to tell her.”

“You don’t know my mother,” said Seamus. “She’ll weasel anything out of anyone. Anyway, your
mum doesn’t get the *Daily Prophet*. She doesn’t know Dumbledore’s been sacked from the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s losing his marbles —”

“My mum says that’s rubbish,” said Neville. “She works for the Ministry, and she says the *Daily Prophet* is going downhill, not Dumbledore. Dad says he always knew You-Know-Who would come back. He says if Dumbledore says he’s back, then he’s back.”

Seamus stared at Neville for a moment, then closed the curtains around his bed. Dean, too, got into bed. The dorm room was quiet as Ron began to unpack. It was nothing like the welcome back Harry had expected. Perhaps he should have expected it. But Seamus had always been a loyal friend. Harry remembered what Sirius had said about James and Lily not knowing who their friends were anymore. *Well,* Harry thought, *at least I know.*

He closed the hangings around his bed and lied down, wondering how many more friends he was going to lose by the end of the week.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated.
Harry woke on the first morning of term with a dull headache and a numb feeling in his arm. He extricated his arm from beneath his pillow and tried to ignore the prickling sensation as blood returned to his limb.

Seamus was already awake, dressed in half a minute, and on his way out the door before Harry could rub the sleep from his eyes.

“Does he think he’ll turn into a nutter if he stays in a room with me too long?” Harry asked, loud enough for Seamus to hear as the door closed behind him.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry.” Dean grabbed his school bag. “He’s just…” Dean hesitated, but the words did not come. He shook his head and followed Seamus out the door.

Harry, Ron, and Neville met Hermione in the common room, Dean and Seamus long gone. She frowned at the three of them. “What’s the matter? You look absolutely — oh, for heaven’s sake!” She had caught sight of the notice board, in particular a bright orange ad.

GALLONS OF GALLEONS
Pocket money failing to keep pace with your outgoings?
Like to earn a little extra gold?

Contact Fred and George Weasley,
Gryffindor common room,
for simple, part-time, virtually painless jobs
Hermione ripped the ad from the notice board. “They are the limit. We’ll have to talk to them, Ron.”

Ron blanched. “Why?”

“Because we’re prefects! It’s up to us to stop this kind of thing.” She climbed through the portrait hole with a determined look on her face. Ron followed a little reluctantly, and Harry didn’t blame them. He wouldn’t have liked to be in a position where he had to tell Fred and George to stop doing something. If even their mother didn’t manage to put them in line, how was Hermione going to do it?

“Anyway, what’s wrong, Harry?” Hermione asked as they walked down a flight of stairs. “You look really angry about something.”

Harry ignored her, so Neville answered for him.

“Seamus thinks Harry’s lying about — about You-Know-Who.”

Hermione sighed, like she had expected this. “Lavender thinks so too.”

Harry’s temper flared up inside him. “Been having a nice little chat with her about whether or not I’m a lying, attention-seeking prat, have you?”

For all of Harry’s anger, Hermione didn’t jump to his level of frustration. Her voice was rather gentle. “No, I told her to keep her big fat mouth shut about you, actually.”

His temper deflated as quickly as it had risen.

“It would be quite nice if you didn’t jump down our throats, Harry, because if you haven’t noticed, we’re on your side.”

“I know — I’m sorry.”

“That’s quite all right. It’s important we remember what Dumbledore said at the end of term feast last year.” She glanced at Ron and Neville, expecting their support. Each of them gave her a blank stare.


“Well, I wasn’t there,” Harry said. “So, what did he say?”

“‘His gift for spreading discord and enmity is great. We can only fight it by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust —’”

“How do you remember stuff like that?” interrupted Ron.

“I listen, Ron.”

“So do I, but I still couldn’t tell you exactly what —”

“The point is that this sort of thing is exactly what Dumbledore was talking about. You-Know-Who’s only been back two months, and we’ve started fighting among ourselves. And the Sorting Hat’s warning was the same — stand together, be united.”
They were nice words, Harry thought. He’d gone home with his parents before the end of term last year, after a few days in the hospital wing. He supposed it was no wonder the students didn’t know what to think — they hadn’t seen him since the Triwizard Tournament.

As they walked to the Great Hall, they passed a group of Ravenclaw students who huddled together at the sight of him, like he might lash out at them if they were scattered. It made the idea of unity sound very ill-conceived to Harry.

The weather in the Great Hall was as dull and grey as Harry’s mood. He instinctively looked up at the head table, but there was still no sign of Hagrid.

“Dumbledore didn’t mention how long Professor Grubbly-Plank is staying,” Harry said as they sat down at the Gryffindor table.

“Maybe…” Hermione paused, and glanced around to make sure no one was nearby to eavesdrop. “Maybe he didn’t want to draw attention to Hagrid not being here.”

Ron snorted. “How could we not notice?”

Hermione stopped talking as Angelina Johnson approached them. Ron took a studied interest in a flagon of pumpkin juice.

“Hi, Harry,” she said. “Had a good summer?” And without waiting for an answer, plowed on, “Listen, I’ve been made Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.”

“Nice,” Harry said, and he meant it. She was a good player, and he thought she’d be up to the task of managing the team. Also, her pep talks would hopefully be shorter than Oliver Wood’s.

“We need a new Keeper now Oliver’s left. Tryouts are on Friday at five o’clock, and I want the whole team there, alright? Then we can see how the new person’ll fit in.”

“Yeah, sure.” Harry was looking forward to getting back on a broom. Last year, they hadn’t had Quidditch because of the Triwizard Tournament. It was going to be good to play again.

“I’d forgotten Wood had left,” Hermione said as Angelina left. “I suppose that will make quite a difference to the team?”

“I s’pose. He was a good Keeper.”

“Still, it won’t hurt to have some new blood, will it?” said Ron.

Harry supposed they didn’t have a choice, but he didn’t say anything more about Quidditch. It wasn’t a subject Hermione or Neville could really talk about. Though, Neville didn’t look like he was interested in talking, not with his face that full.

Post arrived, and Harry looked up, wondering if Hedwig had returned from delivering her letter to Hermione’s parents — and there she was. Her snowy white feathers stood out among the rather plain brown owls as she swooped over the hall. She soared down to the Gryffindor table and held her leg out to Hermione. Hermione removed the plain white paper envelope her parents had sent their reply in and tucked it into her bag to read later.

Harry gave Hedwig a bit of toast and remembered he needed to write apology to his mother for losing his temper with her. He’d do it tonight, after classes.

Neville received a package from home, as usual, and another owl came for Hermione, a barn owl,
with the *Daily Prophet* in its beak.

“What are you still getting that for?” Harry asked her.

“It’s best to know what the enemy are saying.” She paid the owl for her paper.

Harry did not think it was really worth it, but, then again, the *Daily Prophet* wasn’t saying anything about Hermione, so maybe she had an easier time stomaching it.

Professor McGonagall came by to deliver the class schedules for the year. Harry took his absently, not bothering to check it until Ron groaned loudly.

“Did you see today?” he asked.

Harry now looked down at his timetable.

“History of Magic, double Potions, Divination, and double Defense Against the Dark Arts… Binns, Snape, Trelawney, and that Umbridge woman all in one day. I wish Fred and George’d hurry up and get those Skiving Snackboxes sorted….”

“Do mine ears deceive me?” Fred squeezed his way in-between Ron and Harry.

George leaned around Neville to grab some food. “Hogwarts prefects surely don’t wish to skive off lessons?”

“Look what we’ve got today,” said Ron. He handed his timetable to Fred. “That’s the worst Monday I’ve ever seen.”

Fred did not disagree. “You can have a bit of Nosebleed Nougat cheap if you like.”

“Why’s it cheap?”

“Because you’ll keep bleeding till you shrivel up, and we haven’t got an antidote yet.” George seated himself next to Neville.

It was a bit of a close call, but Harry and Ron decided to take the lessons over the snackboxes.

“Speaking of,” Hermione said, “you can’t advertise for testers on the Gryffindor notice board.”

“Says who?” George asked.

“Says me. And Ron.”

Ron pocketed his schedule. “Leave me out of it.”

Fred and George laughed.

“You’ll be singing a different tune soon enough, Hermione,” Fred said. “You’re starting your fifth year. You’ll be begging us for a Snackbox before long.”

“Why would starting fifth year mean I want a Skiving Snackbox?”

“Fifth year’s O.W.L. year,” said George.

“So?”

“So you’ve got your exams coming up, haven’t you? They’ll be keeping your noses so hard to that
“Nightmare of a year, the fifth,” said George. “Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up on O.W.L.s.”

“That’s if you care about exam results.” Fred laughed. “George and I managed to keep our spirits up somehow.”

“Yeah, you got, what was it, three O.W.L.s each?” Ron said.

Fred and George looked unbothered.

“We feel our future lies outside the world of academic achievement,” said Fred.

George polished off his toast. “We seriously debated whether we were going to bother coming back for our seventh year, now that we’ve got —”

But Harry cut him off with a warning look. He did not want Ron and Hermione knowing he was the reason Fred and George had the finances for their joke shop.

“— now that we’ve got our O.W.L.s,” George said, changing tack quickly. “I mean, do we really need N.E.W.T.s? But we didn’t think Mum could take us leaving school early, not on top of Percy turning out to be the world’s biggest prat.”

“But we’re not going to waste our last year,” said Fred. “We’re going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what the average Hogwarts student requires from his joke shop, carefully evaluate the results of our research, and then produce the products to fit the demand.”

Hermione frowned at them. “Where are you going to get the gold to start a joke shop? You’re going to need all the ingredients and materials — and premises, too, I suppose.…”

Harry knocked his fork off the table, providing him with an excuse to hide his increasingly warm face.

Overhead, Fred said, “Ask us no questions and we’ll tell you no lies, Hermione. C’mon, George, if we get there early we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Charms.”

Harry heard them walking away and felt it was safe to come out.

“What does that mean?” said Hermione. “Does that mean they’ve already got some gold to start a joke shop?”

Harry searched desperately for an alternate line of conversation.

“I’ve been wondering that,” Ron said. “They bought me a new set of dress robes this summer, and I couldn’t understand where they got the Galleons.”

“D’you reckon it’s true this year’s going to be really tough? Because of the exams?” Harry asked, seizing on the first thing he could think of.

“Yes,” Neville said nervously. “O.W.L.s affect the jobs you apply for and everything.”

“We’ll get career advice, too, later this year,” said Hermione. “To help us choose our N.E.W.T.s.”

Harry glanced at his watch. It was nearly nine. He picked up his bag, and together they started towards History of Magic. “Have you decided what you want to do after Hogwarts?”
Ron’s ears went pink. “Not really… Except… well, it’d be cool to be an Auror.”

Harry thought of Tonks, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, the Longbottoms, and the Prewett brothers. Some were cooler than others, but overall…. “Yeah, it would.”

“But they’re like the elite,” Ron said. “You’ve got to be really good. What about you, Hermione?”

“I don’t know.” She looked thoughtful, and Harry was a bit surprised. He half-expected her to already have the next seven years of her life planned out. “I think I’d like to do something worthwhile.”

“Auror is worthwhile,” Ron said.

“It’s not the only thing, though. If I could take S.P.E.W. further….”

“What about you, Neville?” said Harry hastily, before Ron and Hermione could get into an argument about what defined a worthy career, or worse, house-elf rights.

“Oh, something with plants, I think. Herbology’s about the only thing I’m good at.”

“You’re not half-bad in Charms.”

“Thanks,” he said in a quiet voice.

They arrived at History of Magic, not in the best of spirits, but when they left, Harry felt even lower. There was something exhausting about History of Magic. It wasn’t just boring, it was life-draining. Harry struggled to stay awake in class, perhaps catching about ten minutes of the lecture in total. He and Ron eventually gave up attempting to focus and entertained each other with a game of hangman on a bit of scratch parchment. Harry didn’t know how long Neville actually slept in class, but he snored for about twenty minutes of it.

The bell chimed for the end of class, perfect to the end of Binn’s lecture, and Hermione gathered up her notes. Harry and Ron waited for her.

“How would it be if I refused to lend you my notes this year?” she asked them.

“We’d fail our O.W.L.s,” said Ron. “You don’t want that on your conscience, Hermione.”

“You’d deserve it. You don’t even try to listen to him, do you?”

“We do try, we just haven’t got your brains or your memory or your concentration — you’re just cleverer than we are — is it nice to rub it in?”

“Don’t give me that rubbish,” she said, but Harry couldn’t help but feel she looked rather flattered as they started for the dungeons.

History of Magic was no fun, but Harry knew Potions would be worse. Snape had hated him from day one, and Harry had only a vague understanding of why. He knew that Sirius had nearly gotten Snape killed; James was the one who had saved Snape’s life. He knew that his father and Snape had not gotten along in school, but Harry didn’t know why that had to involve him.

They were just crossing the courtyard when a rather breathless, “Hello, Harry!” pulled his gaze from the gray clouds and his thoughts from Snape’s dungeons.

Cho Chang was standing in front of him, without any of her friends hanging around her. He was suddenly very aware of Ron and Hermione to his right, and wished they might have the sense to
keep walking.

“Hi,” he said, and as he did, his face went hot. He hoped it didn’t show. After the disaster of a conversation on the train, Harry had spent almost every waking minute running through conversations with Cho. He seized on the first one that came into his head. “Er… did you have a good summer?”

“Oh…” She did not look as pleased by the question as she had when he’d rehearsed it in his head. “It was alright….”

“Is that a Tornados badge?” Ron interrupted. He pointed at the golden T pinned to her bookbag. Harry restrained himself from stepping on Ron’s foot, but the damage was already done.

“You don’t support them, do you?”

Cho’s face was cold. “Yeah, I do.”

“Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning the league?”

Harry could very well melt his way into the stones on the pavement and drip himself down to Potions, rather than endure another moment of this conversation.

“I’ve supported them since I was six.” She turned away from Ron with her lip half-curled. “Well, see you, Harry.”

Hermione had the decency to wait until Cho was across the courtyard before scolding Ron. “You’re so tactless!”

“I only asked her if —”

“Couldn’t you tell she wanted to talk to Harry on her own?”

“So? She could’ve done, I wasn’t stopping —”

“What on earth were you attacking her about her Quidditch team for?”

“Attacking? I wasn’t attacking her, I was only —”

“Who cares if she supports the Tornados?”

“Oh, come on, half the people you see wearing those badges only bought them last season —”

“But what does it matter?”

“It means they’re not real fans, they’re just jumping on the bandwagon —”

“Hey,” Harry interrupted as the bell rang, very tired of listening to Ron and Hermione argue, “it’s fine.” It wasn’t but he wanted them to stop. “She’s with Cedric anyway, right?”

Hermione frowned. “Well… no, I don’t think she is.”

“What?”

Hermione bit down on her lip. “At least, I don’t think so. I heard Parvati telling Lavender — oh, it’s just gossip, it’s nothing.”
Harry thought he could throttle both of his friends. “What did you hear, Hermione? Did Cho break up with him?”

“No, that’s not what I heard.” Hermione paused before deciding to tell him. She said it in a rush, as if it was some sort of terrible news she was delivering Harry, and wanted it over with quickly. “Parvati told Lavender that Padma told her that Cho had mentioned to her friend that Cedric broke up with her this summer. But — I don’t know how he could have. He was in Grimmauld Place with us all summer, and we weren’t allowed to send any owls, because Dumbledore didn’t want to risk drawing attention. Perhaps she was just upset she hadn’t heard from him, and she thought he’d broke it off with her. I just don’t want you getting your hopes up over dormitory gossip.”

“I’m not getting my hopes up,” Harry said. “What’s there to get my hopes up? I’m friends with Cedric, aren’t I?”

But Harry’s hopes were very high. Cedric had gotten a letter to Harry over the summer. So surely Cedric could have put the same care into sending Cho letters, if he had wanted to. And it was Cho who had come to talk to Harry — twice now. She wouldn’t be trying to talk to him if she was still trying to fix things with Cedric.

At the very least, Harry thought as they walked into the dungeons, Cho didn’t hate him. Cho didn’t think he was a nutter or a liar, and that felt like a very good start.

If Harry thought that the knowledge that Cho was newly single and actively seeking out conversations with him could carry him through a double Potions class, he was sorely mistaken. The cold, oppressive atmosphere of the dungeons was bad enough. It was made worse by Snape’s displeased frown as he strode into the classroom, cloak trailing behind him. He surveyed the class, looking about as unhappy to be there as they must have felt.

“Before we begin today’s lesson,” he said, “I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting in important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are,” his gaze lingered on Neville and Harry; Harry thought it ought to linger on Crabbe and Goyle, “I expect you to scrap an ‘acceptable’ in your O.W.L., or suffer my… displeasure.”

Neville gulped loudly.

“After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me. I only take the very best into my N.E.W.T. Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying good-bye.”

Harry stared right back at Snape, thinking how grateful he would be to be out of this classroom. Even if he did manage to scrape an O.W.L. in Potions, Harry never wanted to return to Snape’s dungeons again.

“But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell, so whether you are intending to attempt N.E.W.T. or not, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts upon maintaining the high-pass level I have come to expect from my O.W.L. students.

“Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: if you are too heavy-handed with the ingredients you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometimes irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing. The ingredients and methods are on the blackboard —” with a flick of his wand, the instructions appeared there, “— you will find everything you need in the store cupboard. You have an hour and a half. Start.”
Harry struggled in Potions enough as it was. The Draught of Peace challenged every skill he struggled with — complex steps, precise order of ingredients, explicit stirring instructions, and specific simmering temperatures. The attention to detail that Potions required had always eluded Harry. He found concentration difficult enough in a comfortable environment. In the dungeons, beneath Snape’s ever critical eye, it was nearly impossible.

“A light silver vapor should now be rising from your potion,” Snape said as he paced the room.

Harry, sweating in the heat of the classroom, stared dismally at the thick gray smoke rising from his cauldron. There were only ten minutes left, and he did not know how to fix his mistake.

It was not as bad as others, though: Ron’s was emitting green sparks; Seamus’s had no steam at all, and his flame had gone out; Goyle’s was a thick sludge. It was only Hermione who had a silver mist floating over her cauldron. As Snape swept by, he examined it critically, then moved on without comment. That was the closest to a compliment Hermione would ever get from Snape.

When Snape came by Harry’s cauldron, however, he did not move on without comment.

“Potter, what is this supposed to be?” There was a smirk in the corner of his mouth, and Harry bit back several rude remarks.

He hated the way Snape enjoyed tearing down his ego. He didn’t understand what he’d done to deserve Snape’s hatred. “What’d you think it’s supposed to be?”

“Five points from Gryffindor,” he said lazily and without giving a reason, though Harry knew it was for his cheeky answer. “Tell me, Potter, can you read?”

Malfoy snickered; Crabbe and Goyle followed suit.

“Yes, I can.” Harry tightened his fist around his wand, and wondered how much trouble he’d get in if he accidentally let off a hex in here.

“Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter.”

Harry wiped the gray steam from his glasses and squinted through the haze that had built after three hours of potion making.

“Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes, then add two drops of syrup of hellebore.”

If Harry’s frustration hadn’t edged out all other emotions, he might feel bad for having forgotten the hellebore. Instead, he just felt bitter that it was hidden in line three instead of its own step.

“Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No, sir,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “I forgot the hellebore.”

“I know you did, Potter, which means that this mess is utterly worthless.” Snape waved his wand, and the potion vanished from Harry’s cauldron. “Those of you have managed to read the instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it clearly with your name, and bring it up to my desk for testing. Homework — twelve inches of parchment on the properties of
moonstone and its uses in potion making, to be handed in on Thursday.”

Harry did not bother waiting for Ron and Hermione to turn their potions in and clean up their cauldrons. He grabbed his bag and left the dungeons. His potion had been no worse than anyone else, certainly better than Neville’s, whose smelled like bad eggs, or Crabbe’s, which looked like a putrid slime. But everyone else was going to get some sort of mark, except Harry who would be getting a zero for the day. It wasn’t fair.

He stepped out into the courtyard, now drenched with rain, and could not believe just minutes ago he’d been chatting with Cho Chang, thinking she’d possibly broken up with Cedric, and was now interested in him.

He pulled his cloak up over his head and braved his way through the rain alone. It wasn’t until he was seated in the Great Hall that Ron and Hermione had caught up with him.

“That was really unfair,” Hermione said, and while he appreciated her consolation, he really didn’t want to talk about Potions. “Your potion wasn’t nearly as bad as Goyle’s. When he put it in his flagon, the whole thing shattered and set his robes on fire.”

“Since when has Snape ever been fair to me?” Harry snapped.

“I did hope he’d be a bit better this year.” Hermione reached around Harry to help herself to some of the shepherd’s pie. “I mean, you know,” she checked to make sure no one else was within earshot, “now that he’s in the Order and everything.”

“He hates half the Order,” Ron said. “You know he hates Harry’s parents, and Lupin, and Sirius, and he and Regulus Black don’t get on. I’ve always thought Dumbledore was cracked trusting Snape. Where’s the evidence he ever really stopped working for You-Know-Who? I wouldn’t make him a spy, that’s playing right into You-Know-Who’s hands, I bet —”

“Just because Dumbledore chooses not to share his reasoning with you, Ron, doesn’t mean it’s cracked.”

“Regulus Black’s been suspicious of Snape from the beginning. He thought Snape might’ve put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire —”

“And he was wrong. Barty Crouch, Jr. made Winky the house-elf do it —”

“Yeah, but Snape wanted to testify against Regulus, remember? He wanted to get him thrown back in Azkaban —”

“He didn’t know Regulus had been wrongly accused. And anyway, Regulus Black says he did stuff deserving of Azkaban anyway, so —”

“Oh, shut it, the pair of you,” Harry said.

Ron had his mouth open, frozen just before he could spit an argument out. He and Hermione openly stared at Harry as Harry grabbed his bag and got to his feet.

“Give it a rest. You’re always having a go at each other, and it’s driving me mad.” Harry abandoned his lunch and headed up stairs for Divination.

The anger he’d felt in the Great Hall was short-lived. He’d been irritated with Snape, and Ron and Hermione’s fight had pushed him over the edge. Alone, now, since most of the school was at lunch, he felt his temper deflate with every stair he took. He was left with only a throbbing
headache.

It was a long lunch hour, alone in the Divination tower, thinking about how awful Potions had been and imagining Divination might be even worse. He wasn’t sure how. Trelawney didn’t hate Harry the way Snape did. Harry wasn’t sure he could say Trelawney liked him, though, either. The only way to put it was that he fascinated her. She enjoyed predicting his violent death each year.

To be fair to her, Harry had narrowly escaped death several times in his life. He started to count, beginning with his survival of Lord Voldemort’s attack as a baby, but gave up when he got to the dementors by the lake. The number was high, that was true enough.

But after his duel with Voldemort and the start of a new war, Harry wasn’t sure he could stomach another year of his death being foretold. It didn’t feel as silly as it once had.

The bell rang, and the silvery rope ladder that led to Trelawney’s classroom dropped into the corridor. With dread deep in his gut, Harry ascended to the classroom. He was the first one there for quite a while, alone in the very warm classroom, more suffocating than comforting.

The rest of Gryffindor who were taking Divination — Seamus, Dean, Neville, Ron, Lavender, and Parvati — filtered into the classroom in pairs. Dean and Seamus sat on the far corner, as away from Harry as they could get. Though Harry was not sure Trelawney would be bothered enough to scold him for making a remark about it, he held his tongue. Lavender and Parvati were next, talking in quiet whispers, and clearly excited for this class. They, unlike Harry, thoroughly enjoyed the subject of Divination, and drank in Trelawney’s words like syrup.

Ron and Neville were next. Neville sat with Seamus and Dean, which Harry initially thought offensive, then realized Ron had a rather serious look on his face as he sat beside Harry. Harry braced himself to be scolded by Ron for his outburst earlier, and built up a ready retort.

“Hermione and me have stopped arguing,” Ron said.

“Good.”

“But Hermione says she thinks it would be nice if you didn’t take out your temper on us.”

“I’m not —”

“I’m just passing on the message,” said Ron. “But I reckon she’s right. It’s not our fault how Seamus and Snape treat you.”

“I never said it —”

“Good day.” Trelawney interrupted. “And welcome back to Divination.”

Harry did feel a little scolded by what Ron had said, but also a little bitter. He knew it wasn’t Ron and Hermione’s fault he had to deal with Snape and Seamus, but that didn’t excuse their bickering, which would certainly be annoying to anyone, headache or not.

“Trelawney said, “and am delighted to see that you have all returned to Hogwarts safely — as, of course, I know you would.”

Harry nearly snorted in disbelief. He imagined Trelawney was rather disappointed he hadn’t died dramatically yet, as she had so often foretold.

“You will find on the tables before you copies of The Dream Oracle by Inigo Imago. Dream
interpretation is a most important means of divining the future and one that may very probably be
tested in your O.W.L. Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of the
remotest importance when it comes to the sacred art of divination. If you have the Seeing Eye,
certificates and grades matter very little. However, the Headmaster likes you to sit the examination,
so….”

Harry was glad that despite all the horrible classes he’d had so far today he would not have to
continue any of them after this year. He’d never have to sit through a Binns lecture, never listen to
Snape’s criticism, or Trelawney predict his death again. He only needed to get through his
O.W.L.s, and things would be brighter on the other side.

Trelawney left them to their own to read the introduction of the book, then to pair up and interpret
each other’s dreams.

Harry had no intention of recounting his nightmares in the graveyard for Ron. He knew what those
meant.

“But I never remember my dreams,” complained Ron.

“You must remember one of them.”

“I had one that I was playing Quidditch the other night,” Ron said. “What d’you reckon that
means?”

“Probably that you’re going to be eaten by a giant, chirping marshmallow or something.” Harry
flipped through the book, expecting its dream explanations to be as horrific as anything else
Trelawney predicted.

Harry looked up each word Ron used to describe his Quidditch dream, from “broom” to “hoop” to
“flight.” They wrote down several conflicting interpretations of Ron’s dream, and tried to make
sense of it to no avail.

Harry did not feel any better when the bell rang and Trelawney assigned them a dream diary for the
month, insisting they carefully record each of their dreams. Harry had no intention of writing his
dreams down in any notebook.

“D’you realize how much homework we’ve got already?” Ron said as they climbed downstairs.
“Binns set us a foot-and-a-half-long essay on giant wars, Snape wants a foot on the use of
moonstones, and now we’ve got a month’s dream diary from Trelawney! Fred and George weren’t
wrong about O.W.L. year, were they? That Umbridge woman had better not give us anything.”

Harry was not feeling too keen on Umbridge, so he held his tongue. He had a feeling she was going
to set them quite a bit of homework, though he didn’t know what or why.

Hermione was already there when they arrived in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. As
Harry sat down, he looked curiously at the decor of Umbridge’s classroom, but it took him hardly
any time at all.

They’d had a total of five teachers in four years, and each teacher had made the classroom their
own in some way. Professor Quirrell, despite having Lord Voldemort sucking the soul from the
back of his head and being the previous Muggle Studies professor, had been a fairly decent
Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, who had decorated his classroom in artifacts from his
travels around the world. Lockhart had put up portraits of himself; Lily had removed the portraits
and replaced them with paintings of wizards performing powerful defensive spells. Remus had
famously hung the skeleton of a dragon over the classroom, a decoration students still reminisced about, and Mad-Eye Moody had filled his classroom and office with all sorts of dark magic detectors.

Professor Umbridge had filled the room with exactly nothing. The walls were blank, the windows gray backdrops. The only thing in the room with any color was Professor Umbridge’s pink cardigan as she sat at her desk, sipping a cup of tea.

She smiled at them as they walked in. Harry could not find it in him to smile back.

“Good afternoon,” she said, after all ten Gryffindors were in their seats.

A few mumbled back at her.

“That won’t do, now will it?” Umbridge said, though she was smiling as she did. “I should like you, please, to reply ‘Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge.’ One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they said in unison, though without enthusiasm.

“There, now, that wasn’t too difficult, was it?”

Just as he had when she had given her lengthy speech the night before, Harry felt like she was talking to them like small children, freshly arrived at Hogwarts, rather than students who were about to sit their O.W.L.s in just a few short months. Perhaps this class would not be as taxing as others, but he wasn’t sure that was going to be a good thing.

“Wands away and quills out, please.”

Harry’s stomach turned. That was not a good start. There were a few whispers that seemed to agree with him.

When everyone’s desks had a quill, ink, and parchment on them, Umbridge took her wand from her bag and tapped the blackboard beside her desk.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Defense Against the Dark Arts} \\
\text{A Return to Basic Principles}
\end{align*}\]

“Now,” she began, “your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn’t it? The constant changing of teachers, many of who do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your O.W.L. year.”

Harry wanted to know how she had any inkling what level of instruction they’d received when she hadn’t seen them do a single spell or answer any sort of question.

“You will be pleased to know,” she continued, “that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.” She tapped her wand against the blackboard again, vanishing the first words, and conjuring a new list.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Course Aims:}
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
1. \text{Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.}
\end{align*}\]
2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.
3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

There were a few minutes of silence while the class obediently copied the board onto a sheet of paper. When they had finished, Umbridge asked, "Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

A few murmured a response, but for the most part, no one answered.

"I think we’ll try that again,” Professor Umbridge said. “When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply ‘Yes, Professor Umbridge,' or ‘No, Professor Umbridge.’ So, has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

“Yes, Professor Umbridge,” they said as a class, and Harry began to feel the resentment in his stomach grow.

“Good. I should like you to turn to page five and read chapter one, ‘Basics for Beginners.’ There will be no need to talk.”

Harry obediently opened his book, and Umbridge took a seat behind her desk. She watched them begin their assignment with her large, toad-like eyes, while sipping a cup of tea. The room was deadly silent as the students struggled to notate the introduction — all except one.

Hermione’s book remained unopened on her desk. Harry could not remember a time Hermione had ever directly disobeyed a teacher, let alone refused to read a book. Instead, Hermione had her hand raised straight in the air and her eyes fixed on Umbridge.

Umbridge studiously ignored her, watching instead her other students who were doing as they were asked. But the work was so dull — Harry tried to at least read the first few sentences and failed — that they all quickly lost interest. The battle of wills between Hermione and Umbridge was much more fascinating. After about fifteen minutes, each student had completely abandoned the book and was instead staring at Umbridge or Hermione.

Deciding she could no longer ignore Hermione, Umbridge asked, “Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?”

Hermione lowered her hand. “Not about the chapter, no.”

“Well, we’re reading just now.” Umbridge smiled at Hermione, as if Hermione had made a silly sort of mistake. “If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class.”

“I have a query about your course aims.”

Umbridge looked like she’d been caught off guard. The moment was brief, however. “And your name is —?”

“Hermione Granger.”

“Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully.”

“I don’t.”

Harry resisted the urge to openly gape at Hermione. Lavender and Ron were not as adept at hiding their shock. Hermione had never before treated a teacher with this much disrespect, not even
Snape, who probably deserved it.

“‘There’s nothing written up there about using defensive spells,’” Hermione continued.

Harry, though Hermione was always right, reread the board to be sure. So did the rest of the class.

“‘Using defensive spells?’” Umbridge let out a light, girlish laugh, so false it set Harry’s teeth on edge. “I can’t imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren’t expecting to be attacked during class?”

“We’re not using magic?” Ron asked. He looked as stunned as the rest of the class.

“Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr. —?”

“Weasley,” Ron said, and raised his hand in the air immediately, refusing to let her ignore him.

She smiled at the recognition of his name. Harry wondered if it was a pleasant association with Percy Weasley or an unpleasant one with Arthur Weasley. There was no way to tell by her face.

There were now a few hands in the air, Harry and Hermione’s included. Umbridge looked at Harry for a moment, then turned to Hermione.

“Yes, Miss Granger? You wanted to ask something else?”

Harry wasn’t exactly surprised she had ignored him. He was more surprised she had chosen to address Hermione again.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Surely the whole point of Defense Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?”

“Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?” She was not critical, like Snape might have posed it, or even accusing. She was still falsely sweet and smiling.

“No, but —”

“Well, then I’m afraid you are not qualified to decide what the ‘whole point’ of any class is. Wizards much older and cleverer than you have devised our new program of study.”

Harry doubted there were many wizards cleverer than Hermione.

“You will be learning about defensive spells,” Umbridge continued, “but it will be in a secure, risk-free way —”

“What use is that?” Harry asked, unable to contain himself any longer. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be in a risk free —”

“Hand, Mr. Potter!” All sweetness vanished momentarily from Umbridge’s voice, but it returned in full force as she addressed Dean’s raised hand. “And your name is?”

“Dean Thomas.”

“Well, Mr. Thomas?”

“It’s like Harry says, isn’t it? If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be risk-free —”

“I repeat,” she said with her same smile, “do you expect to be attacked during my classes?”
“No, but —”

“I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school,” she said. Though her tone of voice said she wasn’t being critical, her increasingly cruel smile said otherwise. “But you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed — not to mention,” she laughed again, “extremely dangerous half-breeds.”

Harry was on his feet now, but Dean Thomas spoke faster.

“If you mean Professor Lupin, he was one of the best we ever had!”

“Hand, Mr. Thomas!” Umbridge snapped.

Most of the class was murmuring in agreement with Dean. Umbridge looked at Harry, like she was waiting for him to speak, only so she could scold him. Harry waited for her to tell him to sit down, but to do so would mean acknowledging him. Harry gave in and sat back down.

“As I was saying,” Umbridge said, “you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group, and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day —”

“No we haven’t,” Hermione interrupted. “We only —”

“Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!”

Hermione put her hand in the air. There were now four hands raised, all with ready comments and questions, and Umbridge ignored each one of them.

“It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them on you —”

“We actually learned a lot that year,” Sophie Roper, usually fairly quiet in class, interrupted.

“Hand!” Umbridge said, without asking for Sophie’s name. “Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about.”

Parvati’s hand shot up in the air, and Umbridge, ignoring Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Dean, asked, “And your name is?”

“Parvati Patil, and isn’t there a practical bit in our Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.? Aren’t we supposed to show that we can actually do the countercurses and things?”

“As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions.”

Harry had been learning magic long enough to know that was utter hippogriff shit.

“Without ever practicing them before?” Parvati clearly felt similarly. “Are you telling us that the first time we’ll get to do the spells will be during our exam?” She looked a little faint at the diea.

“I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough —”

“And what good is theory going to be in the real world?” Harry interrupted. He was tired of being ignored, tired of this conversation.
“There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter.”

“Oh, yeah?” Harry was fresh from his reflection in the Divination tower of all the things that had nearly killed him in his life. He was ready for this question, perhaps more than any questions she might have asked. “What about a Cerberus, or an acromantula, or a basilisk, or dementors, or, I don’t know, Lord Voldemort?”

The entire classroom gasped at his use of the name. Lavender Brown even let out a little scream. Professor Umbridge did not even flinch. She seemed to have expected this. Unlike Hermione, who had put Umbridge off guard, Harry seemed to have done exactly what Umbridge wanted.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

He wasn’t sure what it was for, but he said nothing. No one else said anything, either. They were watching Umbridge and Harry as intently as they had been watching Hermione, earlier.

“Now, let me make a few things quite plain.” Professor Umbridge finally stood and leaned against her desk. “You have been told a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead —”

“He wasn’t dead,” Harry interrupted, “but yeah, he’s back.”

“Mr. Potter you have already lost your house ten points do not make matters worse for yourself,” she said in a single breath, face flushed as pink as her cardigan. “As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie.”

“It’s not a lie!” Harry shouted. “I saw him, I fought, him, and so did my mum —”

“Detention, Mr. Potter!” Umbridge snapped. “Tomorrow evening, Five o’clock. My office. I repeat, this is a lie. The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means, come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, ‘Basics for Beginners.’”

The class was perfectly still. Some were staring at Umbridge, some were staring at Harry. Not one of them was looking at their book. Harry felt like he was shaking with rage. He did not understand why this woman was being so willfully ignorant. He had hated her on sight and finally felt justified in his anger.

Harry did not take a single note from his book for the rest of the class. He was too angry to think of anything, and his headache certainly didn’t help. He noticed that no one else took notes, either.

When the bell rang, he shoved his parchment into his bag with his quill and stormed from the classroom. As he squeezed past Sophie and Sally-Anne Perks, he heard Sophie whisper, “Did Professor Potter really —”

He did not hear the rest of it, nor did he care. He left the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and headed upstairs to the Gryffindor common room. He did not think he could sit down at dinner and listen to everyone talk about him, listen to their whispers and mutters, certainly not after that outburst.

He muttered the password to the fat lady and tore through the Gryffindor common room, hardly catching sight of Fred, George, and Lee as they headed down to dinner. Harry reached his dormitory and threw his bag onto his bed. Unfortunately, it missed and crashed on the floor just on the other side. He heard his inkwell shatter.
“Harry, are you alright?”

He had expected Ron to have followed him, but the breathless voice did not belong to Ron. He turned to see Neville, panting from the effort of having followed him upstairs, with Ron and Hermione just behind him.

Harry thought Neville’s question particularly stupid, and he decided not to answer it.

“Harry,” Hermione tried in a cautious tone, “can we come in?”

Harry shrugged. They were half-in anyway. What difference did it make?

“She’s mad, you know,” said Ron, as they walked in. “She deserved everything you said at her.” He looked at both Hermione and Harry as he said this.

“Harry,” Hermione tried again, and this time she reached her hand out to him. He stepped away and sat down on his bed.

Hermione did not look hurt by his rejection. Instead, she straightened and pointed her wand at his bag. “Reparo.”

“Why don’t we go down to dinner?” Neville suggested. “You’ll feel better if you eat.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “why don’t we, Harry? No good throwing your things around on an empty stomach.” He tried to smile, but Harry was not amused.

The anger that had come and gone so quickly all day now refused to go, despite the steady efforts of his friends. Harry wished there was something more he could do to feel better, to feel okay again, but the answer wasn’t coming to him, other than perhaps hexing Umbridge, but that was certainly out of the question.

“Fine, I’ll come get dinner,” he said. He did not think it would make him feel better, but his swift climb to Gryffindor tower had burned up a lot of energy, and despite how much anger he felt in the pits of his stomach, there was a fairly large hole that was only going to be filled by a real meal.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons and comments are always appreciated!
**Detention with Dolores**

**Chapter Summary**

Harry serves his first (and certainly not last) detention with Umbridge.

**Chapter Notes**

My sister texted me in dramatic capital letters about Cedric's death. She's reading the books for the first time, and insists she's never seen the fourth film. She was also shocked by Moody's reveal. It's so much fun watching her go through them. She's reading my copies of the books, too, so all my notes about the AU are in the margins.

Shout out to my beta, ageofzero, and all their wonderful Harry Potter headcanons. There are few people I know who have as intimate a knowledge of the events of the books as they do, and it's a real asset when planning ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dinner was about as bad as Harry had imagined it would be. As he, Ron, Hermione, and Neville entered the Great Hall, he felt everyone's eyes on him, and he heard their whispered conversations as they made their way to the Gryffindor table. It seemed the whole school had already heard about his fight with Umbridge and had formed their own opinions on it.

“He reckons he dueled with You-Know-Who….”

“His mum dueled You-Know-Who? That doesn’t seem….”

“…how could anyone survive a duel with You-Know-Who?”

“Who does he think he’s kidding?”

“Come off it.”

Harry’s head still hurt, and he was beginning to wish he had not let Neville and Ron drag him down to dinner. He sat down at the table and helped himself to roast beef. He ignored the way a huddle of first years scooted down another foot on the bench, away from him and his friends.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “I thought Dumbledore told everyone what happened at the end of the year. Didn’t they believe him then?”

Hermione chewed her vegetables for a moment while she considered her answer. “I’m not sure they did.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and Cedric came back, and we didn’t know what had happened in the maze, or much of anything. You were hurt, but, well, it was a task for the tournament, so no one thought anything of
it. Dumbledore and the professors were running around like something was wrong, and then Dumbledore told the school You-Know-Who had come back. No one knew what you had to say about it.”

“And what about Cedric? No one asked him what happened?”

“He didn’t see very much, though, did he?” Ron said. “It started to get around that maybe Cedric hadn’t seen anything after Barty Crouch tried to kill him. Maybe he made the whole thing up because Dumbledore asked him to, or he thought he saw things he really didn’t.”

Harry looked over at the Hufflepuff table. Cedric wasn’t usually hard to find, since he was so tall, but it was particularly easy now, because unlike last night, he was sitting apart from most of his house. Two of the Chasers from his Quidditch team were on either side of him, leaning in close and talking urgently. Cedric appeared to be only half-listening to them as he ate his dinner.

“He’s doing a wonderful job defending himself.” Harry could not help but feel unreasonably angry to see Cedric sitting there quietly. Why wasn’t he correcting what everyone around him was saying? Shouldn’t Cedric have every reason to stand up to Umbridge that Harry did?

“You heard Umbridge,” Ron said. “She wants us to report back to her if we hear anyone saying You-Know-Who’s back.”

“I’m sure it’d be terrible to speak the truth and get a detention.”

“It’s like she’s spying on us or something,” said Neville as he began to help himself to dessert.

“Of course she’s spying on us,” Hermione said. “Why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?” Hermione threw her fork down so suddenly, Harry wondered if there was something wrong with her food. “How could Dumbledore have let this happen? How can he let that terrible woman teach us? And in our O.W.L. year, too!”

“Hagrid said the job is jinxed,” Ron said.

“I know what Hagrid said —”

“Don’t start again.” Harry looked up noticed a pair of second-year Slytherins staring at him from across the hall. “Let’s get out of here. We’ve got a ton of homework to do, anyway.”

Neville cast a forlorn look at his half-finished apple pie, but got up with Ron, Harry, and Hermione.

Though the common room was smaller, Harry felt a good deal more invisible here. These people were used to his presence, and even those like Lavender and Seamus, who didn’t believe what he’d said about Voldemort, ignored him for the sake of civility.

They had just found a quiet corner to work when Hermione said, “Oh, no. No.”

Harry could not imagine what had happened now, what possibly could make this day worse than it already was. He followed Hermione’s line of sight to a corner where Fred and George Weasley were giving chews out to first years.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, “they’ve gone too far. Come on, Ron.”

“I — what? No, come on… Hermione, we can’t tell them off for giving out sweets.”
“You know perfectly well that those are bits of Nosebleed Nougat or — or Puking Pastilles — or —”

“Fainting Fancies?” Harry suggested, as one by one, the first years began to slump forward to the floor.

Those who were watching laughed, except Hermione, who marched toward them with squared shoulders and a set jaw. Ron had one hand on the chair, leaning slightly towards Hermione like he might follow, but his center of gravity rested closer to the chair, like it was drawing him in. The chair won out, and Ron slunk as low into his seat as he could manage.

“She’s got it under control,” he said.

“That’s enough!” Hermione shouted at Fred and George.

“Yeah,” Fred said, “this dosage looks strong enough.”

“I told you this morning, you can’t test your rubbish on students!”

“We’re paying them,” said Fred.

“I don’t care. It could be dangerous!”

“They’re fine, Hermione,” said Lee Jordan. He was busy inserting purple sweets into the students’ open mouths. “Calm down.”

“See, they’re coming round,” said George.

The first years were indeed coming around, though they did not seem to know what had happened. They looked at each other, unsure whether to cry or laugh. Harry figured Fred and George had not told the kids what the candies would do.

“Feel alright?” George asked one of the girls as he helped her stand.

“I think so….”

“Excellent.” Fred made a mark on his clipboard.

“It is not excellent.” Hermione snatched both the clipboard and bag of sweets from Fred’s hand.

“They’re alive, aren’t they?” Fred frowned at Hermione and held his hand out for his clipboard back.

“You can’t do this. What if you made one of them really ill?”

“We’ve already tested these on ourselves. We’re just seeing if everyone reacts the same.”

“If you don’t stop, I’ll —”

“Put us in detention?” Fred raised an eyebrow, like he was daring her to try.

“Make us write lines?” suggested George in a similar tone of voice.

The attention of the whole common room was on Hermione now, and most of the onlookers were laughing. There was no authority Hermione had to exert over Fred and George that would intimidate them.
“I will write your mother,” she said.

Fred and George each looked properly horrified at this. She returned the clipboard and sweets to Fred, ignoring the way their shock turned to scowls, and went back to Ron, Harry, and Neville.

She dropped into the chair the boys had left for her. “Thanks for the help, Ron.”

“You handled it fine by yourself,” Ron said quietly.

Neville suggested they work on the essay for Professor Binns. He and Harry looked over Hermione’s notes from class and tried to navigate the coldness between Ron and Hermione. No amount of flattering Hermione’s intelligence or coaxing Ron out of his sulky mood seemed to work. After a couple of hours writing, Harry had to give up. He was tired, irritable, his head hurt, and he was very done dealing with Ron and Hermione’s snide remarks.

They went up to bed, essays partially completed. Harry noticed Seamus’s curtains were already closed. He wondered briefly if his outburst in Defense Against the Dark Arts had affected Seamus at all but tried not to think about it for long. It was only going to make him feel worse, and he felt bad enough as it was.

—— —— ——

The next day wasn’t as bad as the first, and that was largely due to the schedule. Sure, classes were just as difficult. Like every class from the day before, their professors opened by stressing the importance of O.W.L. exams. Flitwick warned them that exam results would influence their future careers, and McGonagall, like Snape, insisted that each of her students would pass the exam. Though unlike Snape, she was encouraging rather than belittling. Instead of expressing her pleasure at dismissing some of her students for good, she assured Neville that he had no reason not to pass the exam.

Professor Grubbly-Plank, at least, did not stop to talk about O.W.L.s. She merely administered their lesson on bowtruckles without comment. She was a no-nonsense professor who knew her subject, but it did not make up for missing Hagrid. Harry wondered when Hagrid would be back, but Professor Grubbly-Plank refused to answer his questions.

As the students queued up to receive bowtruckles for their groups, Malfoy squeezed in behind Harry.

“Maybe,” he said, low enough to escape their professor’s notice, “the stupid great oaf’s got himself badly injured.”

“Maybe you will if you don’t shut up,” Harry snapped. He did not need to get into a duel with Malfoy again this year, but it was hard to ignore how satisfying it might be.

“Maybe he’s been messing with stuff that’s too big for him, if you get my drift.”

Harry did not understand, but he did not let Malfoy know that as he took his bowtruckle and returned to Ron, Hermione, and Neville. He relayed to them what Malfoy had said.

“D’you think Malfoy knows something the Order doesn’t?”

“Dumbledore would know if something had happened to Hagrid,” Hermione said with confidence Harry wished he shared. “We’ve got to ignore him, Harry. Here, hold the bowtruckle for a moment so I can draw its face.”
But it was hard to ignore Malfoy when he was talking so loudly. Harry started to wonder how Malfoy could know so much about what Hagrid was up to. His parents didn’t share anything about the Order with him nor with any of the others still at Hogwarts, but was Malfoy’s father sharing secrets with Malfoy?

“Yes,” Malfoy said, to Crabbe and Goyle but loud enough for the whole class to hear, “Father was talking to the Minister just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the Ministry’s really determined to crack down on substandard teaching in this place. So even if that overgrown moron does show up again, he’ll probably be sent packing straight away.”

There was a sharp pain in Harry’s hand and he yelped and dropped the bowtruckle. He’d tightened his grip without realizing and nearly broken the creature. As Hermione scolded him and the Slytherins laughed at him, the bowtruckle ran off into the forest. Harry looked down at the two deep scratches in his hand which were now beginning to bleed rather badly.

Hermione handed Harry her handkerchief. “Don’t go picking a row with Malfoy. He’s a prefect now; he could make life very difficult for you.”

Harry thought things were already fairly difficult for him. Between being hated by most of the school (for the third time) and his headaches and nightmares, Harry thought anything Malfoy could do to him wouldn’t be half as bad as what he was already going through. Malfoy could, what, give him detention?

At the end of class, they walked from gardens around Hagrid’s hut up towards the greenhouses for Herbology class. The fourth year Ravenclaws and Slytherins were just getting out of their class. Harry wished he could hide somehow behind Ron, Neville, and Hermione, but he was nearly as tall as Ron, and a good head taller than Hermione and Neville. His desire to disappear only increased as Luna Lovegood ran up to him.

She had her platinum hair tied up in a messy bun and dirt smudged on her nose, which Harry thought fair since she had just left Herbology. He did not understand, though, why she was wearing giant radishes for earrings, and he wondered briefly if she even knew they were there.

Luna took his hands in hers, either ignoring or not noticing his makeshift bandage, and said, “I believe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, and I believe you fought him and escaped from him, and Cedric and your mum, did too.”

“Er — thanks.”

Lavender and Parvati had also come up from Care of Magical Creatures now, and poorly suppressed a fit of giggles.

“You can laugh!” Luna said, wrongly guessing their giggles were about Voldemort instead of her vegetable earrings or her general disorderly appearance. “But people used to believe there were no such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack!”

“They were right, weren’t they?” Hermione said. “There weren’t any such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Luna frowned at Hermione and left without another word. She slipped away between Sophie Roper and Sally-Anne Perks, coming from their Muggle Studies course. They openly stared at her as she returned to the castle. There were a few more students laughing, just as Lavender and Parvati were.

“D’you mind not offending the only people who believe me?” Harry asked as the four of them
walked into the greenhouse.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Harry, you can do better than her. Ginny’s told me all about her, apparently she’ll only believe in things as long as there’s no proof at all. Well, I wouldn’t expect anything else from someone whose father runs *The Quibbler.*”

“She’s very nice, though,” Neville said. “She’s odd, but lots of people are odd.”

Hermione looked at Neville rather like Luna had just looked at her. Harry didn’t think “odd” quite covered Luna, but he appreciated Neville standing up for her.

“I want you to know, Potter,” Ernie Macmillan said as he and a handful of other Hufflepuffs entered the greenhouse, “that it’s not only weirdos who support you. I personally believe you one hundred percent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I.”

“Oh — thanks, Ernie.”

Those who had been laughing at Luna’s outburst now looked surprised or nervous. Lavender was staring at him rather stupidly, and Seamus looked a bit confused, but defiant somehow, like he didn’t care how much people disagreed about Voldemort, he was going to hold fast to his suspicions.

Though Ernie Macmillan was at best pompous and at worst a tattletale, a vote of confidence from Ernie was encouraging. Harry’s parents were some sort of friends with Ernie’s, at least enough that Ernie had attended his eleventh birthday. Harry wondered briefly if he had been sorted into Hufflepuff, would he have been friends with Ernie and Susan the way he was friends with Ron and Hermione?

But before Harry could wonder further, Professor Sprout arrived and class began. She resumed the warnings about O.W.L.s, and Harry was certain he was going to start having anxiety about his exams now, in September, instead of in June. They emerged from Herbology smelling like dragon dung fertilizer, after over an hour of pruning roots of the Woly Shrub.

They were on their way back to castle when they met Ginny coming up from Care of Magical Creatures. She gave them a cheery hello before returning to her conversation with her roommates. They were all headed in the same direction for dinner, though, and Harry overheard more than he needed to about how worried Agatha was about writing to her Muggle boyfriend while she was away at school.

They arrived in the Great Hall, and Harry ate as quickly as he could. His detention was at five, so he didn’t have a lot of time.

“We’ll wait to do the Potions essay until you get back,” Hermione said.

He appreciated it; there wasn’t much he could do about moonstones on his own. “I hope she doesn’t keep me long,” he said. “You realize we have three essays, Vanishing Spells, and a countercharm to finish.”

“And the bowtruckle drawings aren’t done,” said Neville.

“And the dream diaries,” Ron said. He looked up at the ceiling. “And it looks like it’s going to rain.”

“What’s that got to do with homework?” asked Hermione.
“Nothing.”

Harry washed his dinner down with pumpkin juice and stood. “Well, see you later.”

It was not Harry’s first detention by any means. He’d had some that were more exciting than others — treks through the Forbidden Forest ranked as a fairly decent detention; less thrilling was scrubbing cauldrons in Snape’s dungeons. He wondered what Umbridge would give him. Maybe he’d have to brush lint out of her cardigans or fluff her hairbows.

He knocked on the door to Umbridge’s office, and her sweet, girlish voice said, “Come in.”

Harry pushed open the door, and what he saw inside was so revolting he had to resist the urge to close it again.

Umbridge had left her classroom plain, but her office was anything but. Every surface was covered in lace or pink cloth. There were vases of dried flowers on doilies and decorative plates hanging on the walls. Inside each plate were multicolored kittens with bright bows around their necks. They stared at Harry and Harry stared back, utterly unnerved and disgusted.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Umbridge.

Harry tore his eyes away from the kittens and looked at Umbridge, seated behind her desk, looking just as pink and lacy as everything else in the room.

“Evening.”

“Do sit down,” she said, and gestured to a small table by the window. It, too, was covered in lace, and had a wooden chair pushed into it. There was a blank parchment on the table, and Harry guessed he was going to be writing an essay for her. He remembered a sarcastic essay he’d written for Defense Against the Dark Arts once, full of snide comments about the improper treatment of werewolves. He imagined Umbridge wouldn’t be as amused by it as Remus would have been and wondered if he’d be able to write it again.

Harry dropped his bag and sat down in the chair.

“Now, Mr. Potter, I had a pair of students come to me this evening and tell me they’d heard you say that your mother dueled You-Know-Who. I’ve asked you to stop spreading lies once already —”

“That’s what I said in class —”

“Do not interrupt me, Mr. Potter. I’m adding another night of detention —”

“But it’s true! You can’t expect me to —”

“Mr. Potter! Let’s make it three nights, then. We cannot have students spreading evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, can we? Would you like to make it a fourth night?”

Harry’s ears pounded and every part of him felt hot. He was burning with anger, and his head throbbed, and he wanted so badly to lash out at her as he had in class. But he remembered the way his parents had behaved in the Ministry, and he remembered that he had Quidditch tryouts to be at Friday night.

“No, ma’am,” he said, though he had difficulty unclenching his jaw.
Umbridge smiled. “There, already getting better at controlling our temper, aren’t we? Now, you’re going to be some lines for me, Mr. Potter.” She stood, and as he reached into his bag, added, “No, no, not with your quill. You’re going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are.” Umbridge picked a quill up from her desk, a thin black feather with a fairly sharp point. “I want you to write, ‘I must not tell lies.’”

Lines were certainly not as bad as essays. It was the sort of dull mindlessness he should have expected after her Defense “lesson.” Harry did his best attempt at a polite smile and asked, “How many times?”

“Oh, as long as it takes for the message to sink in.” Umbridge returned to her desk and picked up a sheaf of parchment that looked like essays for grading.

Harry looked down at the quill and parchment. He took a deep breath, stilling his temper, and said, “Excuse me, Professor, but you haven’t given me any ink.”

“You won’t need ink,” she said with a little giggle.

Harry looked again at the quill, but it did not look anything like his mother’s Muggle writing supplies. He did not see any internal ink, nor any sort of graphite. He also did not think Umbridge was the sort to use Muggle materials, not after the tone of voice she’d used about half-breeds. So, entirely unsure what she meant, Harry pressed the quill to the parchment and wrote, *I must not tell lies.*

He had no sooner begun than a sharp pain started in his hand. As red ink flowed onto the parchment, the words he wrote appeared in his skin, as though the quill itself was cutting into his hand and taking his blood for its ink. For a brief moment, the words *I must not tell lies* were written into the back of his hand, but as he watched, the cut healed over, leaving behind only a slightly red patch, like his hand was merely too warm.

Harry looked up at Umbridge, shock, revulsion, and anger all warring inside him.

“Yes?” she asked with a toothy smile.

He did not know the right answer. He couldn’t say, “Actually, Professor, this quill you gave me is literally carving words into my skin, and that doesn’t seem right.” It was obvious she knew what was happening. She only wanted him to admit that he didn’t like what she was doing. And if he lost his head again, how many more nights of detention could he stand?

“Nothing,” he said, and went back to writing.

While he wrote, he worked on a plan and decided two things over the course of his detention. The first was that he would give Umbridge no satisfaction by expressing that he was in pain or that he was tired. He refused to check his watch, even as darkness fell. He gritted his teeth against the pain until his neck and jaw were sore, but would not let any sound other than carefully controlled breathing pass his lips.

The second thing Harry decided was that he would not tell his parents what was happening. He tried to imagine what his parents might do in his situation. Lily might behave as he was behaving, determined to withstand anything. James was not the sort to lose his temper, either, unless it was at injustice. This, Harry knew, was unjust, but he could not lose his temper in front of Umbridge. While he felt certain he was doing what his parents might have done in his shoes, he knew that if they found out, there would be Howlers to Umbridge, McGonagall, and Dumbledore in a heartbeat.
Turning to his parents would be like letting Umbridge know she had beaten him. He would tell them when it was all over.

Wasn’t that what they’d decided about secret keeping, anyway? It was alright to keep secrets as long as you shared what was happening in the end. That’s what they’d done with the basilisk, with Regulus Black’s escape from Azkaban. It’s what they were doing now, with secrets in the Order.

His determination was the only thing that carried him through the seemingly endless detention. He could not know how long it had been, only that he was stiff and sore by the time Umbridge called him over to her desk.

He set the quill down and walked over to her.

“Hand,” she said.

He resisted the urge to give her the hand the bowtruckle had swiped and instead gave her what he knew she wanted. The back of his hand still stung, and he held back a shudder as she took his hand in hers and looked over the back of it. The skin was red and raw, but there was no sign of the cuts.

“Tut, tut, I don’t seem to have made much of an impression yet.” She smiled, though, like she was pleased with the pen’s slow progress. “It’s a good thing we’ll be seeing each other again tomorrow evening, isn’t it? You may go.”

Harry, in his haste to leave, nearly forgot to grab his bag. When he was outside the door to her office, he was met with an entirely deserted corridor. He checked his watch and saw it was after midnight.

*Seven hours.* Seven hours, he’d spent in there. Lines for seven hours was bad enough, but seven hours carving words into his own hand — Harry changed his mind about not wanting to give her the satisfaction she’d won. He wanted to see her come crashing down from her post. He wanted to rip a doily out from under her feet and watch her topple over. His parents did not have the power to make that happen, but Harry thought he knew who might.

He started for Professor McGonagall’s office. He didn’t care that it was after midnight, and he did not think McGonagall would care, either.

As head of his house, her office was not far from the Gryffindor common room. She’d stopped by in the middle of the night more than once to tell them to quiet down, so Harry knew she could not be a very heavy sleeper. Still, he had to knock twice before she finally opened the door.

She had her hair in curlers and was wearing her usual tartan nightdress. She was still putting on her glasses as she cracked the door open. She stared at him in surprise.

“Potter — you should’ve been in bed hours ago — what on earth —”

“It’s about Umbridge, Professor,” he said. “Please, I — I just had detention with her.”

McGonagall frowned. Harry did not know if it was about Umbridge or at the idea that he’d already gotten a detention by the second day of school.

“Come in,” she said, and led him into a small sitting room. She waved her wand and Conjured a set of tea and biscuits. “Tell me what’s happened.”

Harry told her how he’d gotten detention in class, how Umbridge had unfairly added two more detentions, and then, with a deep breath, like he was diving into the Black Lake, told her what had
happened in Umbridge’s office.

McGonagall had remained impassive while he explained how he’d gotten his detention, but she frowned ever so slightly when he told her about the quill. She waited until he had finish speaking entirely before asking, “May I see your hand?”

Harry showed her the raw patch of skin. It did not seem to hurt as it had when Umbridge had touched it, but then, Harry did not hate McGonagall’s bony fingers the way he hated Umbridge’s stubby ones.

McGonagall released his hand without comment and picked up a parchment and her quill. “You will go to Madam Pomfrey, apologize for the late hour, and she’ll give you something for your hand. I will see what I can do about the manner of Umbridge’s detention, but you must go for the next two nights. I would encourage you to tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge.”

“She’s vile! I’m only telling the truth — how am I supposed to —”

McGonagall let out a very long, slow breath. “This is not about truth or lies, Potter. It is about keeping your head down. You know who Umbridge is and who she is reporting to. Now, I would like you to get some rest before your Astronomy class in the morning.” She handed him the slip of parchment. “Go to Madam Pomfrey then get yourself to bed.”

McGonagall stood and Harry knew the conversation was done. He had done what he needed to do: tell McGonagall what Umbridge was doing. She’d promised him she’d work on a solution, and that was really all he could ask for.

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The next morning, Harry’s hand was feeling a good deal better. Madam Pomfrey had rubbed essence of murtlap into it, and though the redness was still present, the stinging had subsided. She had not asked what had happened, and Harry had not explained any further than the note McGonagall had given her.

The downside was that none of Harry’s homework was done, least of all his moonstone essay for Snape.

After an exhausting pre-sunrise Astronomy class, he and Ron sat beside each other at breakfast, scribbling a few innocuous dreams into their journals.

“Why didn’t you do it last night?” Harry asked as he described an imagined dream about brushing his teeth while juggling.

“Doing other stuff,” Ron answered vaguely. He slammed his dairy closed. “That’ll have to do. I’ve said I dreamed I was buying a new pair of shoes. She can’t make anything weird out of that, can she?”

Harry did not think so, but he also thought Trelawney’s imagination stretched pretty far when it came to absurd predictions.

“How was detention with Umbridge, anyway?” Ron asked as they headed up to the North Tower with Neville.

Harry hesitated. He’d told McGonagall about it, but he still felt as he had before, that he did not want Umbridge to know he was making a fuss. “Lines,” he said.
“That’s not bad,” said Neville.

“Nope. Er — she gave me two extra detentions though.”

“What for?” Ron asked.

“Dunno. Something about spreading nasty, attention-seeking stories.”

“Blimey, she’s mad.”

Harry appreciated the support.

Ron’s sympathy, however, did not make Harry’s day any better. Divination was as terrible as always. They had Transfiguration again, and though McGonagall did not comment on the fact that he had not practiced Vanishing Spells, he was clearly the worst one in the class. She gave them yet more homework that Harry knew he would not have time to complete, as he had two more nights of detention. He sacrificed his lunch hour to finish his drawing of a bowtruckle, only to be rewarded with more homework from Grubbly-Plank.

Harry was fairly exhausted when he sat down to dinner. He was not sure he would stay awake for another seven hours of detention. He was ready to fall asleep in his potatoes.

“At least it’s only lines,” Hermione said at five-to-five.

Harry slung his bag over his shoulder without a word. He thought the trek to detention would only be more difficult if Hermione knew. She’d be as outraged as his parents would be. Harry briefly hoped McGonagall hadn’t written to them. He had remembered to remind her not to, hadn’t he?

“I can’t believe how much homework we’ve got,” Ron said.

“Why didn’t you do it last night?” Hermione asked. “Where were you anyway? Neville and I did the giant wars essay, but we waited at least an hour for you.”

“I was — I fancied a walk,” Ron said.

At least Harry was not alone in his secrets.

When he reached detention, he saw the thin black quill waiting for him beside a sheet of parchment. Whatever McGonagall had done had not been enough.

Still, Harry held fast to his rule not to give Umbridge any sign he was in distress. He managed what he considered to be a fairly polite “Good evening” and wrote his lines as he had before. Though his hand became irritated more quickly than the previous night, each cut healed just as it had before. When Umbridge released him, his hand was red and inflamed. Harry wondered how much worse it would get before Umbridge was satisfied.

Harry gave Umbridge a short, “Good night,” before closing the door behind him. He took a moment to rub his tired eyes and tried not to think about how much homework was waiting for him back in his dorm.

Harry considered going to Madam Pomfrey again, but the mountain of homework due in the morning was more pressing. By the time he stumbled into his dormitory, it was half-past midnight. He opened up his Potions book and scribbled out an essay on the use of moonstones. Then there were Professor McGonagall’s questions that needed answering, and he still had a paper on the proper handling of bowtruckles. He dashed off some weak answers to McGonagall’s questions, and
started the bowtruckle essay, but could not seem to finish. He’d take care of the essay at lunch tomorrow — or, more accurately, at lunch today. He collapsed on his bed, head aching, hand throbbing, and still fully clothed, only to be aroused five short hours later by Neville, who had to drag both him and Ron out of bed and down to breakfast.

It was another day of homework rushed out in between classes. Hermione quickly corrected his Transfiguration notes at breakfast, and at lunch he finished the bowtruckle essay. There was no time for fixing his moonstone essay, but it wasn’t as if Snape would have given him a good grade on it anyway.

At five o’clock, Harry again found himself at Umbridge’s office, hopefully for the last time. Just as before, the quill and parchment were waiting for him, and, just as before, he said only a polite, “Good evening,” and began to write. This time, though, after a few hours of writing, the cuts remained in his hand, deep red, droplets of blood pearling over the words. He bit down on his cheek and kept writing.

The sun could not have been set for more than an hour when Umbridge left her desk and came to examine his hand.

“Ah, Good. That ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn’t it? You may leave for tonight.”

Harry had so many things he wanted to tell her, so many insults he felt she deserved, but the threat of missing Quidditch tryouts tomorrow held his tongue. “Good night,” he said, and picked up his bag with his left hand, since his right was now dripping blood into her carpet.

At least it was over, for now.

Harry carefully wrapped his scarf around his hand to keep it from dripping in the hallway. No need to have Filch setting him detentions next. He considered going to Madam Pomfrey, but he didn’t think he could stand to see her face if she saw what was written into his hand. So instead he headed back to his common room, unsure whether it was homework calling him or his bed.

There were still students out and about, as it wasn’t after hours yet, so Harry took a few of the shortcuts up to Gryffindor tower. He stepped out of an unused classroom and nearly ran into Ron, half-hidden by a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, with his broomstick in his hands. He started when he saw Harry and tried to hide his broomstick.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Er — nothing — what are you doing?”

“What do you think? I just had detention. Ron, what are you hiding here for?”

“I — Nothing.”

“You can tell me.”

“I’m — I’m hiding from Fred and George, if you must know. They went past with a bunch of first years. I bet they’re testing stuff on them again. I mean, they can’t do it in the common room now, can they, not with Hermione there.”

“But what’ve you got your broom for?”

"Why would I laugh? I think it’s brilliant. It’d be cool if you got on the team. You’re not a bad Keeper, either, when we played at your house. Is that what you’ve been doing every night? Practicing?"

"Yeah. Just on my own, though. I’ve been trying to bewitch Quaffles to fly at me, but it hasn’t been easy and I don’t know how much use it’ll be. Fred and George are going to laugh themselves stupid when I turn up for the tryouts. They haven’t stopped taking the mickey out of me since I got made a prefect."

"I’ll go down early with you if you like," Harry said. "I’m not much of a Chaser, but it’ll be easier than trying to charm Quaffles yourself."

"Yeah, yeah that’d be really great." Ron was grinning now, but his grin slipped when he noticed the scarf wrapped around Harry’s hand. "What happened there?"

"Oh, it’s just the bowtruckle scratch, you know, opened up again."

"Don’t be stupid. I can see the pink lines from that on your left hand." Ron reached for Harry’s arm. Harry stepped away, but he wasn’t fast enough. Ron pulled the scarf off of Harry’s hand and stared at the marks.

"Blimey, Harry, you said she was giving you lines! What’s this?"

"It—it is lines. It’s just — you know, the quill sort of… uses your blood for ink."

"Harry! That — that’s sick is what it is. Go to McGonagall, say something."

"I did go to McGonagall. I don’t think she’s got much power over Umbridge."

"What about Dumbledore? Your parents?"

Harry had to laugh. "Can you imagine if my parents knew? No way. They’d probably pull me out of school or burn the castle down trying. And they’ve got enough going on with the Order and everything. It’s fine, Ron, it’s over now, anyway."

"Only until she gives you a detention again. You know she will, Harry. She’s got it out for you."

Harry shrugged his shoulders, and hoped he gave the impression he didn’t care. Part of him truly didn’t. That part of him wanted to fight Umbridge in her own territory, to look her dead in the eye and write out lines without expression of fear or pain. A more reasonable part of him, however, knew that would accomplish absolutely nothing.

He let the password into the Gryffindor common room end their conversation, though he had a feeling Ron would bring it up again later when they were alone.

—— —— ——

Friday, despite the load of classes and homework, dawned with a feeling of freedom for Harry. It was not only the last day of the week, it was not only a day free of detention with Umbridge, it was a day for flying. The weather was gloomy and damp, but he didn’t care. He’d be able to get on his broom for the first time since the rather boring flight from his home to London. He’d get to play his first round of Quidditch since his birthday.

The minute the final bell of the day rang, Harry and Ron went upstairs for their brooms and back down to the Quidditch pitch. Harry had put a proper bandage on his hand now, but the gloves he
wore for Quidditch covered the injury on his hand nicely. Good; he didn’t need anyone else looking at him the way Ron had during Defense that afternoon.

He and Ron got in a solid hour of practice before the rest of the Gryffindor team arrived. Harry did not think Ron half-bad as keeper. His concern was largely that the competition might be better.

There were six others trying out for the position of Keeper: Georgina Travers and Vicky Frobisher, seventh years Harry had never met before; Geoffrey Hooper, a sixth year Harry had only met in passing; Sally-Anne Perks, from Harry’s class, who Harry was pretty sure he’d never seen her on a broom since their flying class in first year; and Colin and Dennis Creevey made up the last two, too small and skinny to do much good as Keepers. Harry thought they might make better Seekers, if they could fly much at all. Or, maybe they really did have the agility needed to be Keepers. It was hard to imagine either of them blocking three goal posts when it would take about four players their size to fill a goal post.

“Alright,” Angelina announced, “Ladies, gents and…” she looked over the Creevey brothers, “... lads, you’ll each get an opportunity at practicing Keeper with the team tonight. Fifteen to twenty minutes defending from Katie, Alicia, and me while Fred and George aim Bludgers at the team.”

“Excellent,” Fred and George said together.

“Harry, you can practice maneuvers between us. Be as distracting as you like.”

Harry grinned. It felt like his first real smile in weeks. He was more than ready for a real Quidditch practice.

“Travers,” Angelina said, “you first.”

The other tryouts waited at the bottom of the hoops while the Gryffindor team plus Travers took to the air.

Harry had a good deal of fun ducking close under Chasers, weaving between goal posts, and turning sharply to dodge Bludgers. He hadn’t played with his team since his third year and it felt good to do it again.

The freedom Angelina had given him in terms of how to practice left him with a lot of opportunity to watch the tryouts. Georgina Travers, it seemed, was only there to support her friend Vicky. Within five minutes, Katie Bell had scored on her several times, and Angelina cut her tryout after ten minutes. Vicky Frobisher, however, was rather good. Angelina kept her on the hoops for the full twenty minutes.

Geoffrey Hooper was about as good as Vicky, but Harry knew he’d never fit in on the team. He spent half the time complaining that Fred and George were being unfair by aiming at him with Bludgers, that it was technically a foul, and when he missed one of Alicia’s shots, he complained that she had cheated it somehow. Angelina sent him back down after fifteen minutes.

The fourth was Sally-Anne Perks, and she was as miserable as Georgina. Harry wondered why she’d even showed up, until he realized that she was focused on watching the Beaters rather than catching the Quaffle.

It was Ron’s turn next, and Harry couldn’t help but grin as Ron blocked the first of Angelina’s shots. He dodged one of Fred and George’s Bludgers really well, probably from years of practice, but missed a fairly easy save from Katie. It was certainly better than Sally-Anne and Georgina, but it wasn’t the greatest performance. Still, Angelina kept him up there the full twenty minutes, so
that was encouraging.

The Creevey brothers were each as quick as Harry had expected, but their tiny hands had trouble reaching the Quaffle. Dennis seemed particularly nervous and would shoot off to the side much farther than he needed to, leaving all three goal posts wide open. They were done with their tryout in ten minutes each.

Angelina called the team back to the ground. “Good show,” she announced to everyone. “Thanks all of you for showing up. Team, let’s hit the showers. Everyone else — I’ll announce the new Keeper back in the common room.”

It was rather dark as they trooped to the locker rooms. Harry paused to talk to a very pale and shaky Ron.

“You did great,” he said.

“Y-yeah, but… it wasn’t as good as the others,” Ron said dismally.

“You were,” Harry insisted, though he knew it wasn’t entirely true. “I’ll see you back in the common room, alright?”

Ron nodded, and Harry jogged to catch up with the rest of the Quidditch team.

Fred and George were laughing when Harry got into the locker room. He immediately prepared to defend Ron, but it turned out they were laughing at the Creevey brothers.

“It was like watching a pixie,” George laughed as he removed the bracer on his arm. “Can you imagine —”

“Maybe if we could take ‘em both, they’d be as good as one,” suggested Fred.

“Stack them on top of each other,” George agreed, “and maybe they could actually reach the Quaffle.”

“Come off it,” Katie said as she pulled off her practice robes. “They were still better than Sally-Anne, who was only there to make eyes at you two.”

“As if they weren’t there just to make eyes at Harry,” Fred said, and he and George burst into another fit of laughter.

Angelina, in her school robes now, called them to attention. “Listen up — obviously some played better than others today. You all did great, and I appreciated your help. I’ve decided to go with Ron Weasley.”

Fred and George openly gaped.

“What?” Fred said. “After that missed save?”

“What’s wrong with Vicky?” George said. “She was the best, wasn’t she?”

“Vicky told me she’d take Charms club over Quidditch if practices clashed,” Angelina said. “She’s involved in a lot of things, and she won’t prioritize this team. Geoffrey was good, but he’s a real whiner —”

“No kidding,” muttered Alicia Spinnet.
“— so it’ll be Ron.”

Fred shook his head. “Makes sense, but he’s… ah, he’ll be alright.”

“Harry,” she said. It was rather soft, and timed to the moment Harry had just removed his gloves. He shoved his hand in his pocket.

“Yeah?”

“I know he’s your best mate. Practice with him, alright? Help him as much as you can.”

“Sure.”

To the rest of the team, she said, “Practice is at two o’clock tomorrow. Be there, or I’ll be having tryouts for your position next.”

The rest of the team murmured in assent and headed back up to the castle. They didn’t quite make it to the common room, however, because Vicky, Geoffrey, Ron, Sally-Anne, and the Creevey brothers were all waiting in front of the Fat Lady’s portrait, like they wanted to accost Angelina before she could make it inside. Georgina must not have cared about the results.

“Well?” Colin Creevy asked, practically bouncing in anticipation.

“I’m going with Ron,” Angelina said.

“That’s not fair,” Geoffrey whined. “He didn’t even —”

“I made my decision,” she snapped at him. “If you don’t like it, too bad. I’m captain. Now do you want to stand out here and complain all night or go inside?”

Ron looked utterly dazed as they all climbed through the portrait. It wasn’t until Angelina made her announcement to the common room and butterbeers were passed around in celebration that Ron broke into a grin.

“I did it, Harry. I really did it!”

“You did,” Harry said with a grin, and clapped Ron on the shoulder. As soon as he did, a strange sensation started in the pit of his stomach. The general ache in his scar he’d grown accustomed to over the summer flared with pain and the edges of Harry’s vision went white.

“Hey — Harry — alright, mate?” Ron asked, catching Harry’s arm as he stumbled.

“Fine, fine.” Harry rubbed at his scar. “Really, I’m fine.”

Hermione came through the portrait hole at that moment and looked bewildered by the celebration happening in the common room. It wasn’t until Alicia shouted at her that Ron had made Keeper that her face cleared.

“That’s great, Ron!” she said. “Really great! Congratulations.”

Ron grinned at her, looking rather pleased with himself.

“Ron!” Katie Bell called from across the room. “Come here, see if Oliver’s old robes fit you.”

Harry waved Ron off, and he and Hermione took seats by the fire.
“Everything alright, Harry?” she asked, stifling a yawn.

“Just my scar,” he said, and explained what had happened. “Hasn’t done that since… I don’t know, since I actually saw him. But I don’t think he’s here now. That can’t be right.”

Hermione frowned. “No, it seems unlikely. Dumbledore did say it had to do with what You-Know-Who was feeling at the time, didn’t he? Maybe something just happened. You ought to tell Dumbledore.”

Harry wasn’t terribly sure he wanted to tell Dumbledore. Dumbledore, who hadn’t so much as looked at him since last year, who obviously hadn’t done anything about Umbridge and her detentions. What could Dumbledore do about his scar hurting?

“How’s your hand?” Hermione asked.

Harry held up his left hand. “The scratches are healing fine. I don’t think bowtruckles are poisonous or anything —”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “Ron told me about Umbridge. Let me see.”

Feeling a little bitter towards Ron, Harry put his bandaged hand in Hermione’s lap. She undid the bandages and let out a soft gasp.

“Ron said you went to Professor McGonagall?”

“Yeah. Nothing happened.”

“Have you seen Madam Pomfrey? She might be able to —”

“No,” Harry said. “I’m not showing her this.” He took his hand back and rewrapped the bandage around it.

Hermione looked like she was going to say something else, but she closed her mouth as Neville approached them with butterbeer.

“Great news about Ron, isn’t it?” Neville said, handing them each a goblet. “Alright, Harry?”

“Just the bowtruckle,” Harry said. “I’m fine.” He took a sip of his butterbeer, hoping that would end the discussion.

Neville, not nearly as observant as Ron or Hermione, did not press Harry. “I hope Ron’s as good as Oliver. It’ll be good to beat Slytherin this year. Oh — Harry — I mean, that wasn’t your fault. And we won the cup anyway.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “I’m just really tired. It’s been a long week. I’m going to bed.”

“Oh, good,” Hermione said, stifling another yaw. “If you’re going to bed, I can go too without being rude. Good night,” she said to Harry and Neville.

“Okay,” Neville said. “Good night.”

Harry thanked Neville for the butterbeer and headed up to his dormitory. He changed into his pajamas and was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.
Headcanons and comments are always appreciated!
Percy and Prongs

Chapter Summary

Two awkward conversations and two letters.

Chapter Notes

I should've posted this chapter last night, but instead I went to see Ezra Miller's band perform! They were so good and talented! I was really impressed. I've been listening to them on Spotify all afternoon as I write, edit, and avoid homework. I talked to him briefly after their set; he was so sweet and polite. And so very tall, with such sharp features. It was a little overwhelming.

Shoutout to my beta, ageofzero, who has worlds of patience with me.

Enjoy this week's chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Harry woke, it was still dark in the dormitory. Since it was Saturday, he had no reason to be up so early, but he couldn’t fall back asleep. It was hard enough to relax knowing his nightmares and headaches were waiting for him when he closed his eyes, and now he had to accommodate the additional stress of his growing pile of homework that seemed to grip his chest every time he thought about relaxing.

Harry decided he might as well get up. There was no sense in lying awake in bed. He might as well sit awake somewhere away from Neville’s snores. And, he remembered suddenly, he had a letter to write.

He fumbled in the dark for his slippers and a fresh roll of parchment. He grabbed his inkwell from his bag and slipped downstairs to the common room. It was warmer down here, fire crackling and cozy as ever. The lights were low, but it was enough that Harry would be able to see what he was writing. He settled into a plush chair beside the fire, warmer and cozier than his bed.

He owed his mother and father an apology; that he understood. He’d been rude in what he’d said, even though what he’d said was true. He’d hurt their feelings, and even if it had been satisfying in the moment, he felt bad about it now. They were his parents, and he loved them. He also knew that they loved him, and they would forgive him, if they hadn’t already.

The apology was the easy part of the letter to write. The second half was more difficult. He had so many questions for his parents, so many things to tell them that he didn’t want anyone else to know, anyone who might be snooping in his mail. He wanted to ask if they knew where Hagrid might be. He wondered if he should tell them what had happened with his scar. He knew he ought to tell them about detention with Umbridge, but there weren’t a lot of words he could use to describe exactly how horrid she was, even without the limitation of secret code.
By the time Harry did finish his letter, the dark sky had passed gray and gone into a yellow dawn, casting a rather bright glow around the common room. It was short for all he wanted to say and all the time he had put into it, but he wasn’t sure he could add any more to it safely. He reread it, trying to see what some stranger might think of it.

Dear Mum and Dad,

I hope you’re doing alright. I wanted to say I’m sorry for losing my temper over the summer. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I was really upset, but I could’ve been better about it. I’m sorry.

We’ve got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, as usual. Professor Umbridge is about as nice as Sirius’s mum. Her classes have been a riot. You’re always telling me to focus on school, so I want you to know that I’m behaving as well as Dad did in school. I think you’d be proud of me, really.

I’m really glad it’s the weekend. We had Quidditch tryouts last night and it was good to be able to fly again. I’m excited for practice tonight, too.

I’m also sleeping so well, that each day feels like I’ve been taking Sleeping Draught every night, last night after Quidditch in particular.

We’re all missing our biggest friend. We hope he’ll be back soon.

I miss you a lot. Give my best to Remus and Sirius, and the cat as well.

Love,
Harry

Harry carefully folded his parchment then went back upstairs to dress. Dean was just waking up, but the others were still sound asleep. They whispered greetings to each other and got ready for the day in silence.

Harry was glad Seamus was still asleep. After writing to his parents, Harry realized that everything he’d just apologized to his parents for was everything he had done with Seamus. He’d been hurt, angry, and lashed out. The problem was he did not have the guarantee that Seamus would forgive him like he did with his parents.

So Harry said nothing, even as the others in the dormitory began to stir. Once he was dressed, he sealed the letter and headed for the owlery to post it.

The halls were empty, most students not yet on their way to breakfast. It was nice to walk quietly through the castle without being disturbed, nice not to worry about people giving him sideways glances or whispering about him as he passed. As he started up the stairs to the owlery, something brushed against his leg. A skinny gray cat looked up at him with amber eyes.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Harry told Mrs. Norris.

But Mrs. Norris trotted down the hall with her tail in the air, like she was going to tattle on him to Filch anyway. Harry wasn’t sure why. He was only posting a letter, and that was certainly allowed on a Saturday morning before breakfast. Still, after three detentions with Umbridge over absolutely nothing, he felt a little nervous.

The owlery was full, as usual. Several dozen owls flitted in and out of open windows. Most ranged in between shades of brown and gray, or mottled patterns of either color. He made his way across the straw-covered floor, eyes searching for Hedwig and her snowy feathers. He found her on a
perch near the top of the owlery, eyeing a pair of owls about Pigwidgeon’s size, as they squabbled over a mouse.

“I’ve got a letter for you,” he said, holding the parchment up to her.

She hooted, though he wasn’t sure if it was at him or at the tiny owls that had begun squawking at each other. She stretched her wings and soared down to him. Her talons rested on his shoulder, digging just enough to hurt but not to tear. She was careful about things like that. Pig wasn’t usually.

“It’s for Mum and Dad,” Harry tied the letter to her leg, “but I don’t know if they’re at home or at Sirius’s. Can you check both?”

She nipped his nose and took off.

Harry supposed owls had a magic of their own, something that told them where recipients of letters were at any given time. It seemed like a handy magic to have. He watched Hedwig’s flight until she was only a speck on the southern horizon. He was just thinking he ought to go down to breakfast when he saw movement over the Forbidden Forest. The creature he had seen pulling the carriages from the train station shot out of the treetops and dove back beneath the canopy of leaves once again.

Harry tried to tell himself he had only imagined it; surely it wasn’t real —

“Oh, hi, Harry.”

Harry turned around. He had not even heard the door open, but he wished he had. He wished he had a few extra seconds to prepare himself for Cho Chang, to lean casually against the window, to make sure he did not look like he had just witnessed an apparition that may or may not be a side effect of going mad.

“Hi,” he said.

There was a strange pause, filled by the owls’ cooing as they prepared to deliver the morning’s post and Cho’s heavy breathing from all the stairs.

“I was just — it’s my mum’s birthday,” she said, holding up a parcel. “Didn’t think anyone would be up here this early.”

Harry searched for something witty, some sort of carefree comment that was both casual and charming, but his brain seemed determined to fail him. “Right,” he said. “I just sent a letter to my Mum.”

“Is your Mum well?” Cho coaxed one of the larger owls down to her and tied the parcel to its leg.

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, she was, when I left her a week ago.”

“Did she… did she really do what you said she did?”

“Of course she did.”

She gave the owl a gentle push, and it took off out the window. “And you fought him too, just like Cedric said you did?”

Harry nodded. The knowledge that Cho believed him was tinged with the way she had said
Cedric’s name, full of a sadness he didn’t understand, or perhaps did not want to understand.

“That Umbridge woman’s foul,” she whispered, “putting you in detention just because you told the truth. Everyone heard about it. It was all over the school. You were really brave standing up to her like that.”

Any discomfort Harry felt about the way Cho had said Cedric’s name vanished. Three days ago he had wanted to melt his way into Potions, and now he thought he might lift off and fly after Hedwig. Cho thought he was brave.

The door slammed open and this time, Flich strode into the room, wheezing from the climb. Mrs. Norris trotted behind him.

“Aha!” Filch said, as if he had caught Cho and Harry doing something very indecent, instead of merely sending letters home. “I’ve had a tip-off that you are intending to place a massive order for Dungbombs!”

Harry frowned, and for a moment wasn’t sure if Filch was talking to him or Cho. But Mrs. Norris was watching him intently, like she might pounce at any moment.

“Who told you that?”

“I have my sources,” said Filch, strangely confident for someone who was so horribly off the mark. “Now hand over whatever it is you’re sending.”

“I can’t. It’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know you haven’t got it in your pocket?”

“Because —”

“I saw him send it,” said Cho.

“You —”

“That’s right, I saw him.”

Filch glared at Cho and Harry, apparently waiting for one of them to crack. Neither did.

“If I get so much as a whiff of a Dungbomb….” His footsteps were loud as they stomped back downstairs, pausing only for a polite, “Excuse me,” that most certainly wasn’t Filch.

Cedric appeared at the top of the staircase. Mrs. Norris darted after Filch, ducking under Cedric’s foot so quickly he nearly lost his balance and teetered on the edge of the step for a moment, but he caught himself on the railing. He saw Harry and Cho standing in the owlery and froze, foot half-raised, balance entirely centered on the handrail.

Harry was not sure, but he thought the temperature might have dropped five degrees with Cedric’s entrance.

Cedric smiled politely. “Hello, Harry, Cho.”
“Hi,” said Harry.

Cho said nothing. She looked like she might for a moment, but changed her mind and turned to Harry. “Well, bye, Harry.”

“Er — bye.”

Cedric pressed himself against the door frame to let her pass.

“Popular morning for mail,” Cedric said.

“Seems that way,” said Harry. He wished his voice didn’t sound so cold, but he was a little bitter with Cedric for ruining a perfectly good moment with Cho. He considered slipping down to breakfast without any further conversation, perhaps even catching up with Cho, but he had to ask —

“Did you and Cho break up?”

Cedric paused, a barn owl on his arm and a letter still in his hand. “Well — yes, at the beginning of the summer. I thought that was… rather obvious?” He smiled, but Harry didn’t think it was a particularly funny statement.

“Why?”

“She deserves someone better.” Cedric tied the letter to the owl. “Why are you asking?”

“Because — er, Hermione said you might have. I just didn’t know.” He felt his face grow hot. He wished he had just gone downstairs instead of starting this conversation.

“She likes you, you know.” He carried the owl to the window and watched it take off. “I mean, she thinks you’re interesting.”

Harry preferred brave, but he would take interesting. He opened his mouth to politely end the conversation so he could leave, but Cedric spoke first.

“Are you doing alright?”

The question caught Harry off guard, as did Cedric’s strangely intense gaze. “Fine. Why?” It sounded a bit rude, though he hadn’t meant it to be.

“We had Umbridge’s class the other day. She’s something else, isn’t she?”

“Did you get detention?” Harry tugged the sleeve of his robe over his hand, hoping to cover his bandages.

“No. I knew to keep my mouth shut. The Weasley twins on the other hand,” Cedric let out a small laugh, “they were rather rude. They had a fainting fit before she could give them a detention, and she had to send them to the hospital wing.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Harry did not want to be angry with Cedric, but he was. He didn’t understand why Cedric wouldn’t stand up to Umbridge. Didn’t the truth matter to Cedric? At the least, Harry wanted to know Cedric was in his corner, wanted the school to know Cedric was in his corner. Cho had just lied to Filch for him, and Cedric couldn’t manage to correct Umbridge?

Cedric ran a hand through his hair and turned his gaze out the window. “You got my letter this summer, didn’t you?”
“Yeah.”

“It’s like I said then. Keep your head down, be careful.”

“Why, when she’s a foul hag? You want to just let her lie to everyone? Maybe you don’t have to deal with everyone looking at you like you’re mad, but —”

“Sh, Harry —” Cedric glanced at the door over Harry’s shoulder, looking for either Filch or Mrs. Norris, or perhaps for Cho.

“No — this isn’t fair! It isn’t right, and you know it!”

“Of course I know it, Harry. But there’s nothing we can do right now.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t want to do anything.”

Cedric frowned. It was not the first time Harry had seen Cedric frown, but it was the first time Harry had seen Cedric look wounded. It reminded Harry of the way Lily had looked when he’d accused her and James of making promises they never intended to keep. He belated recalled his apology and his resolve not to take his temper out on people he loved. But before Harry could apologize, Cedric seemed to recover.

“I know how hard this is for you, Harry, I really do. But it won’t help anyone to mouth off to Umbridge. She could make things difficult not just for you, but for Dumbledore or anyone in the Order — anyone she even suspects of being in the Order. You realize that, right?”

It hadn’t occurred to Harry, but it made sense. Cedric’s parents worked in the Ministry, and Cedric had spent all summer trying to shield his parents from the worst of what had happened in the graveyard. Cedric would be worried about them.

But Harry’s parents didn’t work in the Ministry, and they’d never taught Harry to be silent in the face of injustice.

“I’m doing my best,” he said.

“I know,” Cedric said.

Harry considered showing Cedric the scars on his hand, considered showing him what it was he was really dealing with. But that would only make Cedric more right. Keeping his head down was for the best. Harry just didn’t know how to do that.

“Should we go down to breakfast?” Cedric asked.

Though Harry didn’t relish the long walk down to the Great Hall with Cedric, he also did not feel like sulking up here in the owlery, and he had no reason to go back to his common room.

“It’s good weather for Quidditch,” Cedric said as they headed downstairs.

Harry glanced out at the window. Whatever gloom had hung over the castle the last week was gone. The sun was bright, the air seemed still. It was perfect flying weather.

“Been out yet?”

It felt odd to Harry to try to make casual conversation, as if they hadn’t just had a fight, as if Harry didn’t feel so angry and frustrated with Cedric and his inability to act. His voice felt stiff as he answered, “Tryouts were last night. For Gryffindor’s new Keeper.”
“Get anyone good?”

“Angelina picked Ron.”

“Tell him I said congratulations.”

There was a pause, and Harry decided the silence was more unbearable than an idle conversation.

“Have you been out yet?”

“Oh, no. I quit playing.”

Harry frowned as they passed the bust of Paracelsus, fallen on its side with a crack in his head. Either dropped by Peeves or knocked over by a rambunctious student who’d taken the corner too sharply. Harry stepped around it and asked, “Why?”

Cedric shrugged. “I’m not built for a Seeker. And Quidditch takes up so much time. I’d rather focus on my studies.”

“But you’re good!”

“I’m alright. It’s not what I want to do.”

Harry had not considered playing Quidditch after Hogwarts. He played it because he enjoyed it now. What did it matter if he wanted to do it after Hogwarts or not?

“What is it you want to do?”

Cedric didn’t answer, and Harry realized he didn’t know him well enough to even guess.

By now they’d reached the main floor of the castle, and there were more students around, all on their way to breakfast. A few cast curious glances at the two of them as they passed by, and Harry saw three young Ravenclaws abruptly stop their conversation when he passed them.

Two girls in yellow-lined robes shouted at Cedric and waved him over. Harry recognized them as the Beaters from the Hufflepuff team, sisters Pearl and Amber.

Cedric waved at them. He was smiling, but Harry thought it was half-hearted.

“I suppose Summerby asked them to convince me to play again,” he said. “Better go let them down one more time. See you around, Harry. Keep your chin up.”

Harry wanted to retort that he could not both keep his chin up and keep his head down, but Cedric was gone before he could get it out.

The whispers sounded louder to him as he made his way to the Great Hall alone, which Harry thought odd, because certainly having Cedric with him made him stand out more than he did while walking alone. He ignored the way students clustered together as he passed, and found Ron, Hermione, and Neville at the Gryffindor table. They waved him over, looking just as pleased to see him as Cedric’s friends had been to see Cedric.

“How do you do, Harry?” Hermione asked as he sat down.

“Fine.” He reached for the eggs. “Just ran into Cedric this morning, that’s all.”

Neville half-stood to get a better look at where Cedric was sitting at the Hufflepuff table. “Is he okay? I thought he’d be friends with us now, after... you know.”
Harry was not sure if Neville meant because Cedric had nearly been killed by Lord Voldemort or if he merely meant they’d spent a summer together cleaning up Grimmauld Place.

“I’m sure he doesn’t want to draw attention to the fact that we were all together this summer,” said Hermione. “It’d be weird if he was suddenly friends with a bunch of students from another house, not even in his year, wouldn’t it?”

“Hey, Harry,” Ron said, “D’you think you could go out to the pitch a bit earlier with me? Just to — er — give me a bit of practice before training? So I can, you know, get my eye in a bit?”

“Sure,” Harry said. He’d never turn down the opportunity for more time on a broom.

“I don’t think you should,” Hermione said. “You’re both really behind on homework as it is.”

Harry wanted to tell her there would be plenty of time to do homework after Quidditch practice, and all day tomorrow, but the morning post arrived. He glanced up for Hedwig instinctively, even though he knew she was on her way to his parents.

An owl came down to their table, bearing the *Daily Prophet* for Hermione. Another larger owl delivered a parcel to Neville, probably full of things that had been left behind at home or at Grimmauld Place.

“Anything interesting?” Ron asked as Hermione browsed the front page of the paper.

“No, just sume guff about the bass player in the Weird Sisters getting married.”

Hermione opened the paper to read it in further detail. Harry helped himself to a second serving of breakfast, while Ron found himself in the sudden task of holding things for Neville as Neville went through everything in his package.

“Wait a moment — oh, no,” Hermione said, and flattened the paper against the table. Ron, Harry, and Neville all craned their necks to see where she was pointing.

“‘The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Regulus Black, notorious criminal,’ blah blah blah, ‘is currently hiding in London!’” Hermione read.

“Where could they have got that information?” asked Ron.

“Lucius Malfoy,” Harry said. “I’d bet anything they know Regulus is working with Dumbledore, and they’re getting the Ministry to find him for them.”

“Maybe,” Hermione said, still skimming the article for more information. “It says he was spotted in Knockturn Alley. ‘Additional witness Mundungus Fletcher told authorities Regulus Black tried to rob him.’ Why would he tell the Ministry about Regulus?”

“If Mundungus stole something from the Black house, you don’t think Regulus would go take it back?” Ron asked. “Sounds to me like Regulus went after Mundungus and got himself nearly caught.”

“Maybe.” Hermione bit down on her lip.

“What’s that there?” Neville pointed at a corner of the paper near his cup.

Most of the page on Neville’s side of the paper was an advertisement for Madame Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions.
“I’m good on robes,” Ron said.

“No, right here,” said Neville, moving his pumpkin juice. There was a tiny article, brief, but very relevant to the interests of all four of them.

Trespass at the Ministry

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of number two, Laburnum Gardens, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on 31st of August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watch-wizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o’clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

“Sturgis Podmore?” Ron asked. “He’s the one who looks like his head’s been thatched. He’s one of the Or —”

“Ron, sh!” Hermione said.

“Six months in Azkaban?” asked Neville. “Just for trying to get through a door?”

“Of course it wasn’t for trying to get through a door,” Hermione said. “What on earth was he doing at the Ministry of Magic at one o’clock in the morning?”

“Something for Order, I’d bet,” Harry said as quietly as he could. “Remember he was supposed to come see us off to Hogwarts? Mad-Eye said he’d missed two check-ins. Maybe he was doing something for the Order and got caught.”

“Maybe he was framed,” suggested Ron. “Maybe the Ministry lured him there, because they suspect he’s one of Dumbledore’s. Maybe there wasn’t a door at all, and they’ve just made something up to get him.”

Harry thought that sounded like a Mad-Eye Moody sort of paranoia, but Hermione looked thoughtful.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that were true,” she said, and carefully folded up the paper.

After breakfast, Hermione and Neville went back to Gryffindor Tower to do homework. Ron and Harry went to the tower to get their brooms.

By the end of the afternoon, however, Harry fervently wished he’d chosen homework over Quidditch. It was, without competition, the worst Quidditch practice he’d ever had.

His morning practice with Ron hadn’t been so bad. Ron did fairly well as Harry launched Quaffles at him, better than he had at tryouts, in fact. But after lunch, at practice with the entire team, things were miserable, and it wasn’t just because Ron played poorly, though that was certainly one of the major factors.

Some of the Slytherins had decided to spend their afternoon watching Gryffindor’s first practice, or, more accurately, mocking the players. Malfoy and his gang sat back and made series of rude comments about the Weasley’s lack of wealth, or Ron’s poor Keeping abilities, or Harry’s mad ravings, or even Angelina’s hair style.

Harry was fairly certain that Malfoy and Pansy, as Slytherin prefects, had better things to do with their day than sit around mocking the Gryffindor Quidditch team, but apparently those things didn’t seem particularly important to Malfoy and Pansy.
Ron played miserably, a combination of nerves and Malfoy’s comments. Harry didn’t know what to do to help Ron, other than encourage him to ignore Malfoy. It didn’t really work, and Harry wasn’t surprised. He often had trouble ignoring Malfoy’s inciting comments, but he found it easier on a broom, on a field where he’d beaten Malfoy two out of three times. Ron did not have that comfort.

To make it worse, Ron played so poorly he gave Katie Bell a bloody nose, chucking the Quaffle at her face instead of just passing it to her. Fred made the mistake of giving her the wrong end of a chew and instead of fixing her bloody nose, she only bled worse.

It was, with no exaggeration, a disaster.

By the time Ron and Harry got back to the common room, neither had the energy for homework. They showered and went to bed without a word to each other or anyone else in their dormitory. There was nothing Harry could say to be encouraging to Ron, no way to make Ron feel better about how he had played. He couldn’t even promise Ron that the Slytherins weren’t always going to be in the crowd mocking them, because come game day, things were only going to be worse.

Sunday dawned with a mountain of homework for each of them. They’d each neglected their homework during the week, and so nothing was done. There was a Transfiguration essay, an essay about Jupiter’s moons for Astronomy, their empty dream journals, charms to practice for Flitwick, and questions to answer for Potions.

Harry started his morning with Potions, knowing he’d better get it done before he was suffering from exhaustion and a headache.

To make things worse, the day outside was perfect. Harry had a view of the Quidditch pitch and could see someone’s team practicing. It was too far away to make out colors. He wondered if Hufflepuff was having tryouts for a new Seeker, or perhaps the Lais sisters had convinced Cedric to play Quidditch again. If he remembered right, they’d also need a new Keeper as Jamie Nettles had graduated last year. Or maybe it was Ravenclaw, and Cho was out there practicing with her team. He should’ve asked her that morning when her team would have Quidditch practice. That would’ve been a much better conversation. He made a note that Quidditch was going to be the first thing he talked to her about next time he saw her.

“Harry, what did you say for the fourth one?” Ron interrupted his daydreaming. “I don’t understand what a Refite Potion does.”

Harry didn’t either, so he flipped through his textbook, searching for the necessary recipe.

They skipped lunch to practice Locomotion Charms, and spent the rest of the afternoon on McGonagall’s long essay on the Inanimatus Conjurus spell. They didn’t dare skip a second meal, Harry’s highest concern being Ron’s increasingly snappy answers and his second concern being his grumbling stomach. Still, they took their books down with them and made notes while they ate, armed with new information to finish their essays.

It was nearly ten when Harry was finally able to set aside his Transfiguration and begin his the essay about Jupiter’s moons.

“D’you think Hermione would let us have a look at what she’s done?” Ron asked, rubbing his eyes and leaning back in his chair.

Harry looked up from a passage on Io. “Doubt it. She’d just tell us we should’ve started earlier.”
Ron groaned, but did not disagree with Harry. Hermione came by at half-past eleven to check their progress.

She yawned, and Harry didn’t know why she was so tired, when she’d done nothing but chat with Ginny and Neville all day and read books for fun.

“Nearly done?” she asked.

“No,” Ron answered.

“Jupiter’s biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto,” she said, pointing at a line in Ron’s essay. “Io’s the one with volcanos.”

“Great, thanks,” Ron snapped.

“I’m only —”

“Yeah, well if you’ve just come over here to criticize —”

“Ron —”

“I haven’t got time to listen to a sermon, alright, Hermione, I’m up to my neck in it here —”

“No, look.” She pointed to a window. Perched on the ledge was a screech owl, staring down at Ron.

“Is that Hermes?” asked Harry.

“What would Percy be writing me for?” Ron asked, but got up to open the window anyway. Hermes handed him a parchment envelope then took off. Harry thought the envelope rather thick as Ron brought it back to the table. Ron seemed astonished at the fancy script of the address.

To Ronald B. Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts

“It’s Percy’s handwriting,” Ron finally looked up from the letter at Hermione and Harry. “What do you reckon?”

“Open it, of course,” said Hermione.

Ron did. He pulled out several sheets of parchment, all thoroughly covered in writing. As he read, the shock on his face slowly became a dark scowl. By the time he was finished reading, he appeared absolutely disgusted. He shoved the letter at Harry and Hermione, clearly too furious to tell them what it said.

Harry and Hermione laid the letter on the table and read together.

Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minster of Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect.

I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have always been afraid that you would take what we might call the “Fred and George” route, rather than following in my footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility.
But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternization with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this — no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore’s favorite — but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different — and probably more accurate — view of Potter’s behavior. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing — and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school too. You may not have heard this yet, but Potter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and he did not come out of it looking too good. He got off on a mere technicality if you ask me and many of the people I’ve spoken to remain convinced of his guilt.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter — I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent — but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter’s behavior that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a really delightful woman, who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore’s regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that so far Professor Umbridge is encountering aggressive resistance from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week — again, see the Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this — a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticize our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore (if you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore’s, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the Ministry, and we have good sources telling us that known petty thief and conman Mundungus Fletcher is in a good relationship with Dumbledore. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders). I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of association with such people — the Minister really could not be more gracious to me — and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents’ beliefs and actions either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realize how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter, and congratulations again on becoming prefect.

Your brother,
Percy

It was a lot for Harry to take in, and Harry wasn’t quite sure how to take it. It was offensive, and he ought to be angry, but he remembered his resolve not to take his anger out on people he loved.
“Well,” he tried to sound amused by Percy’s letter, “if you want to — er — what was it? ‘Sever ties’ with me, I swear I won’t get violent.”

Ron snatched the letter from Harry and ripped it in half. “He is —” he tore it again, “— the world’s biggest —” another tear, “— git.” He tossed the scraps of shredded paper into the fireplace. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about, like finishing our essays before dawn.”

“Oh, let me look over them,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I’ll correct them for you.”

Ron blinked at her. “Really? Are you serious? Ah — you’re a lifesaver, Hermione! What can I —?”

“You can say, ‘We promise we’ll never leave our homework this late again.’” She held her hands out for their essays, looking rather amused by their predicament rather than annoyed.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” Harry said, passing his homework to her.

While Hermione corrected their essays, Harry sank into the chair and stared in the fire. Though he’d been careful not to let loose his temper on Ron, Percy’s letter has been as incensing as Seamus’s disbelief. Percy had known Harry for most of his life; their families were close; they’d gone to the Quidditch World Cup together. He’d been hurt to know Percy had left the Weasley family over him, and seeing it here in Percy’s handwriting, so cold and matter-of-fact was almost unbearable. It made Harry uncomfortable to think that he was the reason for the rift between Percy and Percy’s family. Even as he thought it, though, Harry knew that this was about a good deal more than whether or not he was a liar or mad.

A gentle tapping at the glass brought Harry from his thoughts. Another owl was at the window, trying desperately to get in. For a moment, Harry thought he was imagining it, because Hermione and Ron were both bent over Ron’s essay, entirely ignorant of the noise, but after a moment Hermione looked up.

“Goodness, Harry, I thought that was just your quill. It’s a tiny little thing, isn’t it?”

Harry got up and let the owl in. It was no larger than Pigwidgeon, certainly, and dark gray with a few white spots on its chest. He’d never seen it before, and the parchment envelope was blank.

“Who’s it for?” asked Ron.

The owl dropped the letter into Harry’s hand, then shot out the window, surprisingly quick for its size.

“I guess it’s for me.” Harry broke the wax seal on the envelope and found a letter written in familiar handwriting. “Oh — it’s from my dad. Why didn’t he just send Hedwig back?”

“Did you put anything… sensitive in your letter?” Hermione asked.

“I made it sound really normal,” Harry said.

“Did you tell them about detention with Umbridge?” Ron asked.

“Er — sort of.” Harry sat back down to read the letter. It was about as vague as his had been, but Harry understood what it meant, at least most of it.

Dear Snitch,
Glad to hear you’re sleeping like you’ve taken Sleeping Draught. It’s going to be a stressful year, and you need all the rest you can get. I wouldn’t worry too much about stress keeping you awake or bothering you during the day. We knew this year was going to be difficult.

It’s good to know you’re getting along with your Defense teacher. Moony is quite fond of her, as I’m sure you guessed by talking to her. She is an excellent teacher, and is making sure you’re up to Ministry snuff. You know how worried the Ministry is about the events of the summer, how they’re not fond of students using magic outside of school. They’re being very careful about what you learn, so you can learn properly.

You don’t have to worry about us here, or anyone else. Everyone’s in the biggest of health, as far as we know.

Love,
Prongs

Harry passed the letter to Ron and Hermione.

“I don’t get it,” Ron said.

“The last bit’s about Hagrid, isn’t it?” Hermione asked. “You shouldn’t have asked about him —”

“Everything I said in my letter sounded like this one,” Harry said. “Except I didn’t use family nicknames like Moony and Prongs. Dad doesn’t usually do that in letters. Don’t know why he did this time.”

“In case it got into the wrong hands, obviously,” said Hermione. “This way, even if someone did get a hold of the letter, they wouldn’t even know it was for you, let alone who it was from or about. That’s probably why they didn’t use Hedwig, or an owl anyone would recognize.” Hermione looked over the letter again. “Moony’s Mr. Lupin, isn’t it? I suppose he and Umbridge wouldn’t get along. Sounds like your dad’s confirming the Ministry doesn’t want us using Defensive magic.”

“What do they expect?” asked Ron. “That we’ll take over the Ministry of Magic?”

“What’s the first part?” Hermione asked. “The part about Sleeping Draught.”

“My scar,” Harry said. “It hurts worse if I take Sleeping Draught. Dad’s just letting me know not to worry about how it hurt the other night. It’s like you said: it’s bound to hurt more these days because he’s really back.”

Hermione handed the letter back to Harry. “Shame he didn’t say anything about Regulus Black. I’d like to know everything’s alright.”

“I didn’t know to ask about Regulus,” Harry said. He stifled a yawn. “Are we done with homework yet?”

“Yes, just change that to Calliope.” She pointed at a part of Harry’s essay. “And I would be careful where you keep that letter. It is very well written, but all the same.”

Harry nodded. He read the letter over one more time before tossing it into the fire. It curled in the heat and crumbled to black ash, just as Percy’s letter had, and together the three of them went up to their dormitories.
Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

Chapter Summary

A weekend at Grimmauld Place is more tense than usual.

Chapter Notes

This chapter. This chapter is... it nearly did me in, truly. It took me two full weeks and went through about three complete overhauls where I scrapped the main idea and switched to something new. I really hope it's worth it!

Shoutout out to my beta, ageofzero, for reading through two drafts. It is the only chapter to have been beta'd on two separate occasions. So I guess it can have a medal for that, or something.

There are lots of good things in this chapter! Some Tonks, some Wolfstar, some Marauders banter, a bit of Regulus Black, and a brief discussion about Umbridge's anti-werewolf legislation. It is also very long, totaling about 25 pages in the doc. Dialogue heavy, I think, but still long.

Disclaimer: I don't condone day drinking. No one needs three glasses of firewhiskey before noon. (Champagne or screwdrivers are a different story.)

Sirius was not sure he had ever been so angry in his life.

“What were you thinking?” he shouted. The frames on the walls filled to the brim as all the sane portraits of the house crammed in to catch up on the latest family gossip. They did not need to; Sirius’s voice carried through most of the house as he paced the parlor. “Forget spotted — you could have been caught and arrested or even killed or —”

“What I choose to do with my time is none of your business,” Regulus said, but he refused to meet Sirius’s gaze. Instead he looked intently at the tea table, where Sirius had thrown the Daily Prophet when he and James had returned.

“Not when you’re on my watch, it isn’t!”

Sirius and James had thought that leaving Regulus alone at the house for one night would be a good idea. They’d thought staying at James’s house would be a much better way to spend the full moon, and it would give Regulus a run of Grimmauld Place. It was a perfectly planned evening. Until Regulus had gone and ruined it by getting spotted in Knockturn Alley. Sirius would have liked to have been told about Regulus’s near-escape from the Ministry, but instead he’d had to find out from the newspaper. If he and James hadn’t happened to pick one up on the way back to Headquarters, he might have never found out.
“Sirius,” James sank into a chair and ran his hands over his face, “pipe down before you wake your mother.” After being up all night, they’d slept the morning away, but it did not change the fact that everyone was always so tired these days.

Sirius accepted James’s criticism and stopped shouting, but he did not stop sulking. He collapsed into a chair with his arms crossed. “It was a stupid thing to do,” he said to Regulus. “Over what, some goblets?”

“Mundungus Fletcher is a petty thief.” For all Regulus’s traditional reticence, his voice was full of venom. “I was not going to let him plunder our home. It was maddening enough to know you were pawning our family treasures. I was not going to stand by while some conman robbed us of our history.”

Sirius knew how much Regulus loved this house, loved their family. He had never shared that love, but he had, over the last year, tried to understand it better. He still did not think Regulus was the sort who would go down Knockturn Alley over some silver goblets — not when he was wanted by the Ministry for crimes and murders he had not committed, and not when he was wanted by the Death Eaters for a murder he had committed.

“Please don’t tell me you think we’re stupid enough to believe you’d publicly confront Mundungus over a few goblets,” said Sirius.

James said, “I rather think if you were that upset with Mundungus you’d’ve tricked him down into the wine cellar and bricked him inside. You’re far too clever for a public fight in Diagon Alley.”

Regulus looked up at James. After a moment’s pause, he said, “It needed to happen.”

Sirius would never understand how James managed Regulus so easily. If he’d been alone, this argument would have only been a shouting match with no answers and no conclusion. Sirius supposed James wasn’t Regulus’s brother, which must’ve helped, but Regulus had never liked James — never. Sirius could recall several moments Regulus had openly criticised or even mocked James while growing up. So what was it that had changed now?

“It is important that the Dark Lord thinks I am acting alone, with nowhere to hide,” Regulus continued. “As grateful as I am that you rescued me from that graveyard, you’ve left me in a rather… uncomfortable position.” He looked at Sirius. “If the Dark Lord knew that Dumbledore and I had exchanged information, it would be terrible for all of us.”

“That’s your fault for running off to try to murder Voldemort yourself,” Sirius said.

“My fault or not, it is the situation we are currently in, so I did what needed to be done.”

“At least you weren’t caught.” James stretched his arms over his head. “And I do feel better knowing You-Know-Who thinks you’re acting alone.”

Sirius disagreed. He did not like the way James was immediately appeased because Dumbledore’s name was mentioned. Sirius trusted Dumbledore, but he did not like the Potters’ blind faith in Dumbledore’s orders.

“You still shouldn’t have done it,” Sirius said, though he knew it was a terrible argument. He knew he sounded petulant and unreasonably stubborn. “It was stupid and dangerous.”

“Sometimes,” said Regulus, “there are things that have to be done, regardless of how dangerous they are.”
Sirius knew that, but he also knew a thing or two about being reckless. This felt reckless. Reckless like taking on the Dark Lord and all his Death Eaters alone sort of reckless. He had always thought of his brother as careful and calculated, but he’d seen Regulus take risks these last two years even Sirius wouldn’t have dared.

James, not nearly as concerned, yawned and stretched. “How many of us are there for dinner tonight?”

Since the children had gone off to school, Grimmauld Place had been rather empty. The Diggorys, Longbottoms, and Weasleys had only taken up residence so they could keep an eye on their children while they worked for the Order. Now that the kids were all at Hogwarts, the house was left to be managed by Sirius and Regulus. James, Lily, and Remus, of course, stayed, too. It was nice to have more space in the house again, and Sirius was grateful to be back in his old bedroom. He still shared it with Remus, though. It was easier that way.

“Will Lily be back tonight?” Sirius asked.

“She said she’d come back in time for dinner tonight,” James said. “And I expect Nymphadora will stop by.”

Sirius tried to hold in a laugh, but it came out as a snort anyway. Tonks said it was “just so much easier to come over for dinner than to go home to my mother.” While it was probably true that she preferred eating with people who didn’t correct her table manners, Sirius guessed her real intentions had more to do with a certain werewolf.

Tonks’s crush on Remus had been obvious for a long time. Even when she was still a student and Sirius would come by to visit Tonks’s mother, Tonks would often asked after Sirius’s “good friend Mr. Lupin.” James had always teased Remus about being a cradle snatcher. It had been something silly, because they all knew Remus wasn’t interested in Tonks.

But Remus and Tonks had become better friends since Regulus Black had broken out of Azkaban. Sirius liked when he could count family and friends together, so he hadn’t thought anything of it. This last summer, though, Sirius had begun to notice the way Remus’s smiles grew increasingly shy around Tonks. The eye contact he had once held out of politeness seemed harder to extract from him.

“Dinner for six then,” Sirius said. “Assuming Remus is feeling up for food.” Remus had elected to continue his morning nap into the afternoon, and Sirius wasn’t sure he’d even be up before tomorrow morning. Stress always made the full moon harder, and they’d never been under more stress than these last few months.

“Six is good,” James said, “and it wouldn’t hurt if we make extra, anyway.”

“Let Kreacher cook,” said Regulus. “He ought to feel needed around here.”

“Sure, if you don’t mind being poisoned,” said Sirius.

“Kreacher wouldn’t poison you.”

“You’re an excellent liar, Reggie, but even you couldn’t convince me of that.”

It was so easy to fall back into their old patterns of bickering. These small arguments were certainly better than their large fights, though it would not be unheard of for this to lead into a larger fight. Living with Regulus again, though it had been over a year now, was like living with an exposed nerve. There were too many easy shots between the two of them.
This time, James intervened before escalation. “Why don’t we help Kreacher?” When Regulus looked appalled at the idea, James added, “I help Mellie and Picksie in the kitchen all the time.”

“Well, I’m not helping Kreacher in the kitchen,” Sirius said.

“No one asked you,” James said. “You’re a terrible cook.”

Sirius could not argue with that. He’d managed to pass Potions largely because he was James’s partner, but he’d never taken it beyond his O.W.L. year, and he’d never picked up cooking once he’d begun living on his own. The skills required for each were not something he possessed nor had much care to develop.

James, who had always excelled in the skills necessary for Potions and cooking, got up to browse the kitchen’s stock of food, and Sirius reached for the paper. He had originally picked it up to check the Quidditch scores, before he’d been distracted by the article about Regulus. Before he could turn to the sports section, however, Regulus snatched it from him.

“What’s this about Podmore?” Regulus asked, looking at a corner of one of the pages.

“Not sure,” Sirius answered, perfectly honest. “He stopped showing up about a week ago. We hadn’t heard from him until we saw it in the paper.”

Regulus ran his thumb over his chin. “So you’re guarding something behind a door, then? Is that what all your watch shifts are about?”

“Hah.” Sirius snatched the paper back from Regulus. “They’re about watching Death Eaters. I thought you knew that.”

Regulus’s cold gray eyes examined Sirius for a moment, but he gave up searching for whatever it was he wanted and left. Sirius opened the paper up to the Quidditch scores, but his mind drifted elsewhere.

Regulus was not in the Order, and that was on one hand because most of the Order distrusted him and on the other because Dumbledore had insisted. Regulus was not to know any more than he needed to know, but Sirius did not know if that was because Dumbledore also distrusted Regulus or if Dumbledore had something else in mind.

Whatever Dumbledore’s reasoning, it meant that Regulus had no idea what the Order of the Phoenix did, other than oppose Voldemort. He did not know what was tucked away in the Department of Mysteries, what Voldemort so desperately wanted, and what the Order was so desperately protecting.

Truthfully, most of the Order didn’t know what they were protecting. A prophecy regarding Harry and Voldemort, yes, that everyone knew, but they did not know exactly what the prophecy said. Only five people knew the true contents of the prophecy: Dumbledore, whom the prophecy was first told to all those years ago; James, Lily, and Sirius whom Dumbledore had told when he’d told after that fateful night in Godric’s Hollow; and no one had told Remus, at least not for a few more years.

Unfortunately, Quidditch scores were insufficient to drag Sirius’s wandering thoughts away from his memories of the first war, so he abandoned the paper to join James in the kitchen. He couldn’t quite picture Kreacher chopping vegetables while James boiled water, or putting a pie together while James stuffed a turkey. Even if Kreacher did help, he’d hobble around the kitchen, muttering about James being a blood-traitor. James put up with Kreacher spectacularly, but Sirius didn’t think
he should have to.

Sirius went downstairs, either to rescue James or pester him. It was a strange sight, to see Kreacher and James working together, like two separate parts of Sirius’s life had come together in a strange eclipse, or perhaps collision was a more accurate description. Not that James and Kreacher were fighting, but it felt to Sirius as chaotic as if the sun and moon had crashed into one another.

“Kreacher, measure out the tarragon and mustard for me, please,” said James.

Kreacher listened, because Sirius had already told him that James, Lily, and Remus were to be obeyed with the same authority as family. Regulus had reaffirmed it as well, so Kreacher had no excuse. But that did not mean Kreacher obeyed without complaining.

“Mister James does not know what he’s doing,” Kreacher grumbled as he pulled a jar of spiced mustard from one of the cabinets. “Filthy blood-traitor Potters, can’t even properly make a chicken. What would Mistress say? She’d be ashamed to have this wretch served in her home. Master Regulus deserves a better meal.”

“Next time, Kreacher,” James said with a bright tone, “you can buy six chickens and cut the breasts out yourself. Why you’d want to do extra work, I’ll never know.”

“James, you don’t need to humor him,” said Sirius.

James added Kreacher’s mix of tarragon and mustard to the cream in the saucepan and set it over the stove. He lit the gas with his wand. “He’s being fairly helpful. Hasn’t put aconite in anything yet.”

“Don’t give him ideas.”

“Kreacher, cut the potatoes, please.” James tapped the spoon in the cream with his wand, and it began to stir on its own. Hands now free, he added the chicken to a buttered pan.

Kreacher obeyed, grumbling all the while about taking orders from a blood-traitor, about the shame of working alongside a wizard from a nasty family. James seemed to find the whole thing fairly amusing rather than bothersome. But James had grown up with Mellie, who also grumbled and complained like Kreacher. The difference was that Mellie loved and cared for her home and the family in it. Sirius knew Kreacher did not have that love and concern for anyone he complained about it. Kreacher would sell out Sirius, James, and the rest of the Order for as little as a pine nut. It was probably only Regulus’s influence that kept him in this house. That, and his magically binding contract.

Sirius was able to keep his mouth shut while Kreacher moaned about blood-traitors and shameless sons, but when Lily returned from her watch, and Kreacher made a comment about “filthy mudbloods,” Sirius was out of patience. He ordered Kreacher to get out of the kitchen. But by that time, James was done.

Lily watched Kreacher pass by her with an unreadable expression. She had never openly criticized Kreacher nor given Sirius a hard time for how he treated Kreacher. It surprised Sirius, because Remus had told him that Lily had developed surprisingly strong opinions about house-elf rights last year. In Kreacher and Sirius’s case, however, she seemed to understand Kreacher and Sirius were entirely out of her control.

Once Kreacher had left, she gave James a kiss on the cheek. “Have we moved reports back to the usual cupboard?” She crossed the kitchen to the cupboard they’d used to keep reports in, until the
kids had left for Hogwarts.

There was a new lightness to James’s voice as he portioned dinner out onto three plates. “Sure is a lot easier now that the kids are all gone.” He was always so much cheerier when Lily was around, so much more himself.

Sirius took one of the plates and seated himself at the long table in the kitchen. “It’s a lot quieter, anyway.”

Lily sat down at the table with a parchment and quill and started filling out her report. “I certainly prefer it. I like not feeling like we’re keeping secrets from Harry.”

Sirius wanted to tell her that it was a stupid thing to feel, because she certainly was keeping secrets from Harry, but James set the plate down with a rather loud thump that made Sirius wisely change tack of conversation. Tonight was not the night to start a fight with Lily.

Instead he asked, “Anything interesting in your report?”

Lily shook her head. “I want to hear what Tonks has to say when she gets back. She’s the one on Ministry duty tonight. She’ll know what happened to Sturgis.”

“You don’t think he just got caught on duty, then?” Sirius asked. He’d been hoping it was something that simple.

“He had Moody’s cloak,” said James. “He shouldn’t have been caught. You don’t think he turned traitor and tried to get it himself, do you?”

It had crossed Sirius’s mind. But suspicion was so easy for Sirius, and so dangerous. He and Remus had been torn apart over suspicion, and their friendship now was only a fragment of what it could have been had they trusted each other. Sirius and Remus had already agreed that this time, they would trust their friends. It was not easy for Sirius, but he was making an effort.

“I don’t think so,” Lily said. “Sturgis knows he can’t actually touch it.”

“Yeah,” James said, running his hand along his jaw, “but do we really think You-Know-Who’s going to show up and claim it himself? In the middle of the Ministry?”

“It’d make our lives a lot easier if he did.” Sirius took a bite of the chicken. He was about to say he’d spend every last Knut he had to see the Minister’s face if Voldemort Apparated right into the middle of the Ministry of Magic but he was interrupted by a large crash upstairs. Instead, he said, “Ah, Tonks is here.”

The portraits in the house sprang to life, screaming at the intruder, at each other. It didn’t last long; Regulus was quite used to getting the house back in order, and he was much more efficient at it than Sirius.

The door to the kitchen creaked open, and Lily hastily vanished the parchment she’d been writing on, but it was only Tonks who came through the door, not Regulus.

“Evening, Tonks,” Lily said with a smile.

“Dinner’s hot, if you want it.” James waved his wand and got a plate for her.

“Thanks, I’m starved.” She took the seat beside Sirius. “How’s Remus doing?”
Sirius resisted the urge to tease her for asking after Remus. He wasn’t sure whether he was afraid to encourage her discourage her, but either way, he only said, “Fine, just resting,” and quickly changed the subject. “Did you see Regulus upstairs?”

“He said he’d be down in a minute.” Tonks took a bite of the potatoes. “Not much for socializing, is he? Would it kill him to talk to people for once?”

James poorly hid a laugh behind his hand.

“I mean,” she swallowed, “he’s like a vampire — which reminds me, did Kingsley get that article to you?”

Sirius gestured to the mantle over the kitchen fireplace, where he’d tacked up the Quibbler article about Regulus being a vampire. Sirius had found it the funniest piece of literature he’d read in his life. Regulus had not been nearly so amused.

“We actually had to take it seriously,” Tonks laughed. “Kingsley sent a team out to Transylvania to scope it out. Of course, that was before last night, when Mundungus made his report. Couldn’t keep his mouth shut, could he? What a tosspot. Lucky he didn’t blab about the Order, while he was at it.” Tonks paused and pushed the potatoes around her plate without eating them. Her voice was quieter when she spoke again. “Sturgis, of course, didn’t say a word through his whole trial. Knew he was going down, but wasn’t about to take anyone else with him.” Tonks shook her head. “Poor guy.”

“Do we know what happened to him?” Lily asked.

“Imperiused, probably,” she said. “Which is unnerving. No sign —”

The kitchen door swung open and Tonks stopped talking. Regulus walked in, envelope in hand.

“Plenty of food,” James said, and got a plate together for Regulus. “Do you want —”

“You’ve had a letter,” Regulus interrupted, and held an envelope out to James and Lily. For someone who had been raised with pureblood manners, Regulus could be incredibly rude. But Sirius supposed he was in no position to criticize.

James took the envelope addressed only to “Mum and Dad,” and passed it to Lily. She frowned and looked at the wax seal on the back.

“From Harry?”

Regulus sat down at the table. “Unless Sirius has a wife and child he has neglected to mention, or perhaps you have another child with a snowy owl. Kreacher’s just getting Hedwig food if you wanted to send a reply.”

Lily prodded at the seal with her wand. “Seems untampered,” she said, and broke the wax.

James leaned over her shoulder to read it. “Harry says hello to everyone,” he said to Sirius. “To you, too, Regulus.”

Regulus seemed surprised by this — at least, Sirius thought he looked surprised. It was always so hard to tell with Regulus.

Lily’s puzzled expression turned to a dark scowl as she read the letter. She passed it to Sirius with a rather disgusted expression. Sirius didn’t understand why until he saw Umbridge’s name in the
“She’s the Defense teacher?” Sirius asked. “Dolores Umbridge is teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?”

“It would seem so.” James drummed his fingers against the table. “Can’t imagine why Dumbledore would hire her, of all people.”

Tonks made a face, one of her particularly grotesque ones that always reminded Sirius of a Hag. “She’s terrible. I had to visit her office once to get her signature, and I swore I was never going back there. Everything was covered in lace, and I mean everything.”

Sirius read through the letter twice to make sure there was nothing sensitive to the Order within it — not that Harry knew any more than Regulus, but it couldn’t hurt to be careful — before passing it to his brother.

“Are you worried about his headaches?” Sirius asked James and Lily.

Lily conjured herself a cup of tea. “We’ve spoken with Dumbledore about them. I wish there was something we could do but….”

“It sounds like,” said James, “he’s going to have them until this business with You-Know-Who is finished. I wish there was an easy way to talk to Harry.” James drummed his fingers against the table. “But we can’t very well reply to this letter, knowing it could be read by anyone in the Ministry.”

“You could use the floo.” Regulus set the letter down. “Wouldn’t have to worry about replying in code that way. You could have a conversation with Harry, be sure nothing is misinterpreted.”

Sirius was surprised, but he supposed he shouldn’t be. Regulus had a talent for subterfuge. “That’s a good idea —”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Lily said. “Floos are so easily watched and eavesdropped on.”

“Too bad you couldn’t send a patronus all the way to Hogwarts,” Tonks said thoughtfully. “Then Harry couldn’t reply, though. And who knows who’d be there to receive it besides him. Hm… The Ministry sure is making this hard on us.”

Sirius drummed his fingers against the table. It was a moment before the memory struck him. He looked at James with a raised eyebrow. “There are other ways of carrying on a private conversation.”

It took James a moment, but his puzzled expression cleared after a moment. “Are you offering?”

“Sure. I’ve got my half lying around somewhere.”

“I can send it to Harry,” James said, “and wait until he gets it —”

“Send what?” Lily asked.

When they were still at Hogwarts, Sirius and James had gotten their hands on a pair of mirrors and enchanted each to show the other’s reflection. That part had been easy, and there had been a few months where they’d simply made faces at each other through the mirrors until they’d gotten them to reflect sound, too.
“Those mirrors Sirius and I made —”

“Absolutely not! What if he opened it in front of the school? He’d have no idea what it was. What if some Ministry official got a hold of it? How would you know when it was safe to look at? How would Harry even know how to use it?”

“Alright,” James said. “Fine.” He folded his arms over his chest. “What do you suggest then?”

“We do our best,” Lily said. “Reply to his letter, but answer his questions the way he asked them. And don’t use any names. Harry will understand. You can give him the mirror when you see him and when you can explain properly how to use it. Besides, you don’t even know where yours is.”

“I know exactly where it is. It’s in the attic somewhere.”

“The attic we cleaned out last year? That attic? The one where everything’s been moved into strange places throughout the house?”

James pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. “I get it. I’ll just write a reply as best as I can and hope Harry understands it.”

Lily took his hand from his face and checked his watch. “If I Apparate quickly, I should be able to make it to Diagon Alley in time to get an owl.”

“An owl? What for?”

“Everyone at the Ministry knows what Hedwig looks like,” Tonks said. “It’d be silly to send her with an encoded message.”

Lily’s smile was proud, and she nodded once at Tonks. She kissed James cheek. “I’ll be right back, dear.”

It was a testament to James’s exhaustion that he didn’t laugh or even crack a grin at the endearment. Lily left the kitchen quickly, her half-finished dinner still on the table. It was quiet with her gone. It reminded Sirius too much of his childhood family dinners, and he finished his food quickly.

When he was done, Sirius began to clean up the dishes. He’d never gotten the hang of cooking, but he’d done plenty of chores when he’d lived with James. Mr. and Mrs. Potter had insisted in drilling a sense of responsibility into their sons, so Sirius had learned very quickly how to properly wash dishes and clean stoves. It was no wonder James was so used to helping house-elves in the kitchen. He’d been doing it most of his life.

James was still seated at the table, staring down at his plate. Everyone was exhausted these days, but James especially so. He was never quite himself unless Lily was with him. Sirius remembered with a small pang that James had been better during the first war. But they’d all been more carefree the first time around. Before their friends started dying, before they’d had to worry about protecting children.

Eventually, James got up for parchment and ink. He carefully penned a reply to Harry’s letter, pausing every few lines to make sure what he needed to write down was a good answer for Harry’s veiled questions.

Tonks finished her dinner and took the dishes to the kitchen sink. “Do you want help, Sirius?”

He laughed. “Sure! Break as much china as you want.”
“Sirius,” said Regulus, “be careful with the dishes.”

“I will, when you be careful about leaving this house.”

“Don’t tell me what to do with my —”

“Guys, honestly,” James interrupted without looking up from the letter, “can I have even one hour without you two jumping down each other’s throats?”

Sirius obediently shut his mouth and handed Tonks dishes to dry.

There were two things that would pull Sirius out of a fight. Those things were seeing James exhausted or Remus exhausted. Perhaps he would calm his temper for Lily, too, but Lily didn’t usually wear her exhaustion for anyone but James to see, and in the few moments Sirius had seen Lily worn to her bones, he had called for James. To comfort her was to make her more uncomfortable. It was one of the many things Sirius and Lily had in common.

Tonks dried the dishes as they were handed to her, and when Sirius had finished, she asked, “Where do I put the plates?”

“No,” Regulus said. “You’ve each risked enough. I’ll put the plates away.”

Sirius couldn’t quite suppress a grin as Regulus levitated the plates into the china cabinet. It was possibly the most housework Regulus had done in his life. Sirius thought he should have Tonks help with dishes more often.

Shortly after dishes were put away, Lily returned with a tiny grey owl. “They said he was their fastest. I think he’ll hardly be noticeable. But we should make sure the letter arrives in the evening, right? Be sure no one notices?”

“Fine,” James said. He handed Lily the letter for her approval.

“What’re you gonna call him?” Tonks asked.

“Oh.” Lily looked up from the letter with a concerned expression. “I… hadn’t thought far ahead enough to keeping the owl.”

Ah, Sirius thought, there was Lily’s weariness. Visible in cracks, poorly-thought plans. She was always five steps ahead of where she needed to be, but when she was tired, she missed spots.

“Why don’t you name him?” James suggested.

Tonks snorted. “No thanks. I don’t want to give him a name he ends up hating.”

Regulus frowned at her. “You mean, you expect the owl to pick its own name?”

“Well, it could,” though Tonks didn’t sound as sure of herself as she usually did.

“Perhaps we ought to get some sleep.” Lily stifled a yawn. She rolled the letter up and handed it back to James. “We can name the owl tomorrow before we send it off.”

“Did you want to sign it?” James asked.

“No, there’s nothing I could write that Harry would understand and a snooper would not. I’ll write Harry a proper letter another day.” She covered another yawn with the back of her hand.
Though it wasn’t particularly late, Sirius, too, felt ready for bed. It wasn’t just that it had been a long day, it had been a long summer. Exhaustion was very rapidly becoming the norm for them.

“Guess I’ll head out, then,” said Tonks. “I’m off tomorrow, but I’ll stop in on Monday.”

“You’re always welcome to stay here,” Sirius offered, ignoring the glare Regulus shot him. Sirius certainly didn’t mind Tonks breaking things on her visits. In his opinion, it was as much her house as his anyway.

“Thanks,” she said, “but Dad’ll freak if I’m not home. And Mum’ll lecture me for worrying Dad.” Tonks rolled her eyes. “See you later, then. Give Remus my best.”

(Of course we will,” said Lily.

They all headed upstairs together and wished each other another round of goodnights as Tonks left. James and Lily went up to the room they were sharing. Sirius went up to his room, where Remus was still sleeping off the aftereffects of the full moon.

Sirius tried to step softly, but Remus woke anyway. He’d always been a light sleeper. Perhaps he’d learned it trying to catch James and Sirius at pranks in the middle of the night.

“What time is it?” Remus murmured as Sirius changed into pajamas.

“Late,” Sirius said. “You slept all day.”

Remus groaned. “I don’t feel like it.”

Sirius was fairly certain they’d had the exact same exchange a few dozen times. “There’s dinner, if you want it.”

“Downstairs? That’s far.”

Sirius climbed into the space beside Remus and stared up at the miniature dragon skeletons he’d hung from the ceiling over his bed. They’d been a gift from James when he was twelve. It was a wonder they’d survived this long. Sirius had always imagined his mother had burned his room down and destroyed everything he’d left behind. It had been strange to return home and find it exactly as he’d left it.

“There was a letter from Harry,” Sirius said. “He said hello.”

“Any news?”

Sirius thought he ought to tell Remus about Umbridge, but now was probably not the time. “Just his scar hurting. And apparently a detention. He said he was behaving as well in school as James did.”

“Are James and Lily upset?”

Sirius replayed their conversation and realized that, unlike previous years, punishment for detention hadn’t been discussed. There was no talk of grounding nor not buying brooms nor rescinding Hogsmeade permissions. “They don’t seem to be.”

“That’s good,” said Remus. He yawned. “Harry needs to rebel a bit more.”

“Really? Not that I’m one to criticize, but he’s gotten into his fair share of trouble.”
Remus seemed to be slowly falling back asleep. “I mean… he needs to fight. That’s okay.”

Sirius understood. He’d been the same way when he was younger. When things were going wrong outside of your control, like having a vile hag for a mother or Voldemort rising to power, it helped to have something to fight against. Remus, in his own way, had had that need as a student, too. It was probably why he and Sirius had become such good friends, despite their radically different personalities. They both knew what it was to face the unfaceable.

Sirius continued staring at the ceiling and thought that he should tell Remus what they’d learned about Podmore, but he couldn’t find the words to deliver bad news when Remus was so tired. He searched for some good news in what had happened tonight. There wasn’t much to deliver.

“Tonks says hello,” Sirius said.

Remus didn’t move, but Sirius was certain there was a missed beat in his breathing.

“Oh? How is she.”

“Good. Asked after you. Stayed for dinner.”

Remus said nothing. Sirius let the conversation end on the pretense that they were each nearly asleep, even though he knew by the pattern of Remus’s breathing that Remus was no longer near sleep. They would have to talk about Tonks eventually. Remus could not feign indifference forever. Perhaps now was not the time for the conversation, but eventually they’d have to talk. For now, Sirius was content to let them each pretend to fall asleep until exhaustion overwhelmed them entirely. It was not that long of a wait; weariness was ever-present in the middle of a war.

—— —— ——

Sunday passed without event. James and Lily sent the letter off to Harry, using their new courier, who was still unnamed. James had suggested Hedwig II, and Lily had called him an idiot. Sirius was personally in favor of Zephyr, because that little owl was fast and deserved to be named after the wind. James had said the name was too large for such a small owl.

Monday morning, however, dawned with trouble.

Sirius had an all night shift for Sunday evening, but after Regulus’s escapade, hadn’t been sure he should leave the house. Remus had offered to take it from him instead, and insisted he was recovered enough to do so. It had taken a full day of convincing, but Sirius had eventually relented. Remus was due back any moment, and Sirius grew more and more anxious with every passing minute. He pushed his breakfast around his plate without much interest. Lily kissed James goodbye and went off for her watch — well, truthfully it was James’s watch, but Lily often took over for James. She was terrible at mediating between Regulus and Sirius, far too much like Sirius to be of any help, and James and Remus had grown tired of leaving one war zone to come home to another. Lily was left in charge of headquarters only when Sirius was out. It was best for all of them.

Now that Lily was gone, James’s eyes kept drifting to his watch. Sirius wondered if he was counting down the minutes Lily was away or counting up the minutes Remus was late. Probably both.

Regulus drifted into breakfast with a book in his hand half an hour later. He said a polite good morning to James and Sirius, but no one was much for further conversation. James and Sirius were understandably distracted.
Another ten minutes passed before the door banged open so suddenly, and a set of footsteps stumped their way downstairs so loudly, Sirius was certain Tonks was making an impromptu morning visit. But it was not Tonks who flung the kitchen door open and threw the *Daily Prophet* on the table. It was Remus, looking unusually furious.

“Did you see the paper?” he said.

Sirius was too shocked to even be relieved to see Remus safe. “Course we haven’t, mate. None of us get the paper —”

“Look at it.”

Remus had thrown it down face down, so James turned the paper over to reveal the front page.

**MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

**DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST EVER “HIGH INQUISITOR”**

The accompanying photo was of Dolores Umbridge with a wide smile, blinking in the flashes of the cameras.

“The hell is that?” Sirius asked.

James, tentatively, like he was afraid the image might spring out and attack him, picked up the paper. “Well, it’s certainly not good,” and he began to read. “*In a surprise move last night, the Ministry of Magic passed new legislation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

“‘The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time,’ said Junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. ‘He is now responding to concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve.’”

“Responding to Malfoy’s gold-filled pockets, more-like,” Sirius interrupted.

James commented with only a helpless shrug. “*This is not the first time in recent weeks Fudge has used new laws to effect improvements at the wizarding school. As recently as August 30th Educational Decree Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person.*

“‘That’s how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts,’ said Weasley last night. ‘Dumbledore couldn’t find anyone, so the Minister put in Umbridge and of course, she’s been an immediate success, totally revolutionizing the teaching of Defense Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what’s really happening at Hogwarts.’”

Sirius could not hold back. “So they just openly admit she’s a bloody spy?” He had thought that Umbridge was bad enough of a person that her appointment as a teacher at Hogwarts was terrible news. This news was even worse. It was no wonder Remus was so furious.

“Can I finish?” James raised an eyebrow. “Or would you like to read it yourself.”

Sirius sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalized with the passing of Educational
Decree Twenty-three, which creates the new position of ‘Hogwarts High Inquisitor.’

“‘This is an exciting new phase in the Minister’s plan to get to grips with what some are calling the ‘falling standards’ at Hogwarts,’ said Weasley. ‘The inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post, and we are delighted to say that she has accepted.’

“The Ministry’s new moves have received enthusiastic support from the parents of students at Hogwarts.” James snorted once before continuing.

“‘I feel much easier in my mind now that I know Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation,’ said Mr. Luctis Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. ‘Many of us with our children’s best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore’s eccentric decisions in the last few years and will be glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation.’

“Among those ‘eccentric decisions’ are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previews described in this newspaper, which have included the hiring of werewolf Remus Lupin, half-giant Rubeus Hagrid, delusional ex-Auror ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody, and the infamous Lily Potter, who, according to witnesses at a Hogwarts Quidditch match, bullied renowned author Gilderoy Lockhart into ceding his position to her.”

Sirius was too stunned to comment. It couldn’t be called libel, because nothing they’d said was technically untrue, but that didn’t make what they’d said polite or respectful.

“Rumors abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts.

“‘I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step toward ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose confidence,’ said a Ministry insider last night.

“Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts.

“‘Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge’s office,’ said Madam Marchbanks. ‘This is a further disgusting attempt to discredit Albus Dumbledore.’ (For a full account of Madam Marchbanks’ alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page 17).”

Remus continued pacing the kitchen. His hands unknotted and reknotted his tie as he walked, or buttoned and unbuttoned his cloak, like he couldn’t decide what to do with himself.

“Well,” James said again. There were no words. Sirius searched for the right set of expletives to summarize the situation, but came up with nothing.

“The Ministry certainly has it in for Dumbledore,” said Regulus, as if that appropriately covered the situation.

“They have it in for all of us!” Sirius snapped. “Pulling Remus and Lily’s names out like that, and Hagrid and Mad-Eye, and appointing Umbridge of all people.”

“Why is Umbridge so particularly terrible?” Regulus raised an eyebrow.

“Apart from her horrible sense of fashion?” Remus said. He seemed to have finally found
something to do with his hands. He was busy uncorking a bottle of firewhiskey. “Or her fat, flabby toad face? Her stupid bug eyes and big bow and —” The cork came out with a pop.

“She wrote a tidy bit of anti-werewolf legislation,” James explained. “The sum of it being that any employees who request off dates around the full moon are to be properly investigated, because all werewolves are supposed to be registered. So either you’re registered and not hired for being a werewolf, or you aren’t registered but no one can hire you. It gave the Ministry the authority to check the workdays of anyone who was suspected of being a werewolf and an employer official reason to dismiss staff if they were considered, ‘a danger to their coworkers and clients.’ Essentially, a load of pureblood hippogriff shit.”

Sirius thought James was particularly calm for someone who had just discovered that the most vile woman to walk free since Sirius’s cousin had been thrown into Azkaban was essentially in charge of the school Harry attended.

“Mother would have loved her,” Regulus said.

Remus knocked back a short glass of the firewhiskey and finally managed to sit down beside James. He poured a round for the table and another glass for himself.

Sirius picked up the glass but didn’t drink right away. He was remembering the fight he had wanted to start with Lily last night, the fight he had already had with James and Lily at the beginning of the summer. He felt it was time to bring it up again.

He chose his words carefully. “Surely this changes things.”

It was like James sensed the oncoming fight in Sirius’s tone. He had his glass halfway to his lips, but set it down. “What does it change?”

Sirius chose his words carefully. “Harry’s education. You can’t possibly believe he’s going to learn anything useful at Hogwarts if Umbridge has that much power.”

“It changes nothing.” James downed his glass as quickly as Remus had downed his first. “I don’t want to discuss this any further.”

Sirius had heard the phrase “We’re not discussing it anymore,” far too many times to accept it as a reasonable answer. He was even more incensed because James knew this about him, knew he did not take those words lightly. His face felt hot, and, beneath the table, he tightened his hand into a fist.

“Harry has to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts,” he said.

“There are a lot of things Harry has to learn.” There was a tightness in James’s voice, like each word was meant to be shouted but he was just barely holding his temper back. He poured himself a second glass of firewhiskey. “Lily and I have decided school is the best place for him to learn them.”

“And when the time comes —”

James slammed his glass down. Alcohol sloshed over its brim onto the table. “Harry is not a weapon!”

“I’m not saying that, only that he has to be able to defend himself!”

“Not yet.”
Sirius laughed, but it was sad and bitter. “Not yet? That’s what you said before we sent him off to Hogwarts, and what happened? How many times — he’s fought Voldemort more than we have!”

“How can you keep to that? Voldemort has returned and is out there gaining power. Every second we wait is time we don’t get back. If Harry’s not learning anything at school —”

“There are plenty of things for Harry to learn at school besides Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“And which things will keep Harry alive? Which things will lead to Voldemort’s downfall?” It was the wrong question to ask, and Sirius knew it as it left his mouth. He should have just stuck with his first question.

James took a sip of his drink. His face was flushed now, with alcohol or anger, Sirius wasn’t sure. “Harry. Isn’t. A weapon,” he repeated, emphasizing each word like they were their own individual concepts. “We are not using him to defeat You-Know-Who. He’s our son, and Lily and I have decided Harry needs to be at Hogwarts.”

“We know he isn’t safe there —”

“Because Headquarters is safer?”

“He compared Umbridge to my mother.”

This gave James pause, but it lasted only a moment. He shook his head. “Harry doesn’t know what that means.”

Sirius thought that was a debatable point. He had been secretive about his family, yes, but Harry had learned quite a lot from the letters Sirius had given him two years ago. There were a number of family secrets Harry had had access to that even James might not know about. But Sirius was out of arguments that would sway James, so he deferred to his final hope.

“Remus knows I’m right.”

Remus paused in the middle of pouring his third glass of firewhiskey. He hated being dragged into fights between James and Sirius, but he’d been their mediator since they’d all become friends at the age of eleven. It was hard to leave him out of things twenty-five years later.

“Remus knows I’m right.”

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“I think Harry should stay at Hogwarts —” Sirius opened his mouth to keep arguing, but Remus wasn’t finished, “— but,” he glanced quickly at Regulus, “I think Harry should be told. I don’t think this secret is worth keeping any longer.” Remus took a sip of his drink. “I also think,” he added with a sideways glance at James, “that there’s no right or wrong answer here.” Even as much as he’d had to drink, he knew what James needed to hear. “He isn’t of age, but he’s also been through quite a bit. There isn’t a wrong decision here.”

Sirius drank his glass in one large draw. “Except you promised Harry you wouldn’t keep secrets from him. You really think he’s going to understand why?”

James said nothing more, only finished his drink. Though that may have had less to do with the fight being over and more to do with their present company.

There was not much more they could say in front of Regulus, and none of them were intoxicated enough to run their mouths more than what they had already alluded to. Sirius looked at his brother, who had left his glass untouched and opened his book, but Sirius knew him too well to
think he’d been reading during that fight.

James and Sirius cleaned up the breakfast dishes in silence. Remus and Regulus retired to the sitting room to read, which left them the privacy they needed to continue this fight without worrying about Regulus finding out more than he needed to know. And there certainly was plenty more to be said between them, but neither was ready to say it.

Sirius understood why James and Lily were being cautious. He knew their concerns, he knew they were valid, but he did not understand why their fears of raising Harry poorly outweighed their fears of Harry dying in the fight against Voldemort. What was the point in worrying what sort of man Harry was going to grow up to be if they couldn’t even be sure he’d have the chance to grow up at all?

But Sirius could not find a way to say that to James in a way that James understood.

Once the dishes were finished — all put away without a single chip or crack, despite Sirius’s strong urge to smash them simply to watch them break — he and James returned upstairs. They found Remus fast asleep in the sitting room with a book on his chest. Regulus was missing.

“Did he run off again?” James asked.

Despite James’s natural tone, Sirius still wasn’t ready for casual conversations. James liked to recover from fights by pretending everything was fine. Sirius had never been able to bounce back from something like that so quickly.

“Maybe.”

James hesitated, like he was afraid he might say the wrong thing, or perhaps he was only searching for the right apology. “Do you want help looking for him?”

“No.”

“I’m gonna head home, then. See if I can dig up that mirror out of the attic junk.”

“Fine.”

“You could come with.”

It was the best apology Sirius was going to get from James, this offer of getting out of Grimmauld Place, even though they both knew it was a terrible decision. James and Remus had both learned quickly the best way to apologize to Sirius was to offer reckless decisions as bargains for forgiveness.

But Sirius wasn’t ready to accept it. “I should make sure Regulus is still around somewhere, and let Dumbledore know if he isn’t.”

James’s face fell; he knew his apology had been rebuffed. “Okay. I’ll see you later then.”

“Yeah.”

James hesitated another moment, either considering re-offering or waiting for Sirius to change his mind. Neither said anything, though, and James left alone.

Sirius wandered upstairs, but didn’t find Regulus. He was angry enough to believe he wouldn’t care if Regulus got captured by the Ministry or by Death Eaters and gave up his search rather
quickly. Instead, he set himself to tearing his bedroom apart in search of his half of the mirror set. They hadn’t used them after James became Head Boy — and coincidentally started dating Lily — and he had no idea what had happened to it.

His search took him most of the afternoon. He tore his bedroom apart from top to bottom. There were a half a dozen hiding places, all of them full of prank supplies or other paraphernalia his parents would disapprove of. He found a Muggle decoder ring Remus had given him for his birthday one year, a stack of letters he and James had exchanged one summer, and even a set of jacks he vaguely remembered as once belonging to Peter. Despite the collection of junk Sirius turned up, he couldn’t bring himself to throw any of it away. Its survival in this space was a testament to his survival in this space. He had never really thought of himself as sentimental, but these things were suddenly very important to him.

Around tea time, Sirius finally decided to call it quits. He’d ended up thoroughly covered in dust from his quest into the far corners of his wardrobe, and still come up empty handed. He wondered if the mirror was still in his trunk from his school days. He wasn’t entirely certain that trunk had ended up leaving the Potter’s house with him when he’d moved out after graduation. And if it had, had he taken it from his flat when he’d been evicted? He might have given it to Remus or James, but they’d all moved around each other’s’ homes so much these last few years that there was no way to know whose things were where anymore. There was as much chance it was at the Potter’s estate or the cottage in Hogsmeade as it was in the Hogwarts lost and found.

Sirius went downstairs for tea, but found Remus still sleeping. He couldn’t quite bring himself to wake Remus, not after Remus had pulled an all-night shift so shortly after a full moon. He thought he might as well skip tea if he was going to be alone for it, but Regulus came downstairs covered in just as much dust as Sirius.

“Where’ve you been?” Sirius asked.

“The attic,” Regulus said, “sorting through family heirlooms with Kreacher.”

“Why?”

“I figured I should do that before you decide to sell its contents without even looking at it. I’d never have signed the estate over to you if I’d thought for a moment I’d end up escaped from Azkaban only to find out you’d spent every Knut of our fortune.”

“I haven’t spent every Knut,” Sirius protested. “I even have a few Sickles left.”

Regulus did not seem mollified by this. Instead, he only insisted that Kreacher prepare tea. Regulus was always a stickler for traditions.

They’d only barely sat down in the parlor when the door opened. Sirius expected James to poke his head into the parlor, but it was Lily. She smiled at Regulus and Sirius, though it was not complete. She did not ask after James right away, but Sirius knew her well enough to know he was the first thought on her mind.

“Good afternoon. How are we today?” She sat down and Conjured herself a serving of tea. It was not worth the fight to try to get Kreacher to serve her, though Sirius was tempted to try it today. Despite his lengthy cleaning venture, he was still wound up from his fight with James.

“You’re back early,” Regulus said.

“Hestia came and relieved me,” she said. “Thought I’d take tea with everyone, since I had the time.
Where is James?”

“At the house,” Sirius said, “looking for the mirror.”

“Alone?” Her brow creased in worry. “Or is Remus with him?”

Sirius bit down on the inside of his cheek. It hadn’t occurred to him that perhaps it wasn’t safe for James to go alone. He expected it hadn’t occurred to James, either, or James would have insisted on Sirius going with him. Probably.

“Remus is asleep on the couch,” he said. “James and I… had a fight.”

Lily’s lips thinned. Though she probably didn’t need to, she asked, “About?”

Sirius waved his wand and Summoned the paper. He watched her face closely while she read the article, but she was as unreadable as Regulus.

She set the paper down on the tea table when she was finished. “I see.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Sirius tried not to snap but couldn’t help himself.

“What would you like me to do? March down to Hogwarts and, what was it?” She glanced back at the paper. “Bully Umbridge into ceding her position to me? Or should I go and publicly depose Cornelius Fudge and declare myself Minister of Magic?”

“I think you need to pull Harry out of Hogwarts.”

Regulus rolled his eyes.

“I’m fully aware that’s what you think.”

Sirius knew it was dangerous to start a fight with Lily when Remus was asleep and James was gone, but he didn’t care. “You don’t think Umbridge changes things?”

Lily sipped at her tea. “No, I don’t.”

Her calm demeanor only enraged Sirius further. “Of course you don’t. You didn’t think Voldemort’s resurrection changed anything, so what else would?”

“You were with me that night,” Lily said. She set her tea down and her hand trailed to her pocket. “Do you really think Harry’s ready to face him? We barely made it out alive —”

“Which is why he needs to be properly taught!” Sirius, too, moved his hand so his wand was at his fingertips.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Lily, “whether or not we tell Harry if he’s not going to face Voldemort until after he’s graduated from Hogwarts. We’ve already decided this.”

“And if Voldemort’s decided differently?”

“That’s why we’re here. So that doesn’t happen.” She stood and dropped the paper on the tea table. “I’m going to find James. Good evening, Regulus.” Lily slammed the door behind her so loudly, the portraits in the house began to shriek.

Sirius, Regulus, and a startled-awake-Remus managed to get the house back under control in a few minutes. Though Remus still looked rather dazed and complained of a minor headache, he joined
Regulus and Sirius in the parlor, though he drank a glass of water before he took tea.

“You’ve made yourself into a spectacular ass today,” Regulus said to Sirius as he sipped his tea.

“Sod off,” Sirius muttered. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know that you think Harry should be trained to fight the Dark Lord instead of stuck at Hogwarts where Dolores Umbridge isn’t teaching him anything. You’re absolutely right; you all would make much better teachers.”

It was so unlike Regulus to agree to anything Sirius said that he wasn’t sure he’d heard him right at first. There had to be some sort of catch. “But?”

Regulus stared out the window. “But nothing. Can’t I admit you’re right just once in my life?”

Though Sirius could not detect any sarcasm in Regulus’s voice, he could not shake the feeling that Regulus was lying about something. He only wished he knew what about.

Sirius looked to Remus for help, but Remus only shrugged his shoulders.

That evening, James returned in much better spirits, probably because Lily was at his side. He brought his second apology: dinner from a sandwich shop in Diagon Alley and dessert from Florean Fortescue’s.

This one, Sirius accepted.

Tonks arrived for dinner, surprising no one. James said he’d guessed on what she wanted in her sandwich, but he was happy to Transfigure it into something different. They had a good show, the two of them, turning her sandwich into a gerbil, a tea kettle, and a rabbit, before finally turning it into the turkey sandwich she wanted.

It was the most laughter the kitchen had seen since the kids had left for Hogwarts. Even Regulus had a small smile on his face by the time James brought out dessert. It was the sort of night that might’ve ended in warm goblets of mulled wine, but Sirius figured James and Remus had had enough to drink for the day. It was enough that they were together.

Regulus politely excused himself when Tonks brought out a game of Exploding Snap. The others, however, had a thrilling game in which Tonks lost several eyebrows. Or perhaps she only pretended to lose them so she could make a show of regrowing them.

It was late when Lily protested that as much as she wanted to keep playing, she ought to get some sleep. James stood up to follow.

“No,” she said, “you don’t have to come to bed. Don’t let me ruin a good time.”

“It’s alright,” James said. “I’d rather be with you.”

“I’d better get home anyway.” Tonks waved her wand and the cards slid their way into the box. “You’re always such good fun though.”

“I’ll walk you out,” said Remus.

Sirius couldn’t be sure in the dim kitchen lighting, but he thought Tonks’s pink hair brightened two or three shades. He watched the kitchen door swing shut behind them, not sure what words there were to describe the feeling in his chest.
James said, “He’s smitten.”

“Nearly,” Sirius agreed.

“Does that bother you?”

“Should it?”

James made a vague gesture which Sirius interpreted as, “You tell me.”

He decided to ignore it. He and James had fought enough for one day. As if Lily, too, saw this conversation was too much for them, she kissed James’s cheek and took his hand.

“Come on, dear. Bed.”

James laughed. “Sure. Good night, Sirius.”

Sirius nodded and when Lily and James had gone, turned the kitchen lights out and went upstairs. It felt like a strangely long time before Remus returned. Sirius said nothing of it though; instead he only pretended to be asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
It was well after midnight when Umbridge let Harry leave his latest detention.

He had a full week of this torture looming ahead of him, and he did not know how his hand could get any worse. It had stopped healing long ago, and he was running out of clean scarves to wrap his hand in.

Yes, he had mouthed off to her in Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and while while she examined Professor Grubbly-Plank during Care of Magical Creatures, even though McGonagall and Cedric had both told him to keep his head down and stay out of trouble. The problem was that Harry did not know how to stop himself. He could not sit still while Umbridge blatantly lied about Voldemort and openly criticized good teachers, like Hagrid, Remus, and his mother. She was evil, and someone had to stand up to her. If no one else would, then he would.

When Harry arrived at the common room, Hermione, Neville, and Ron were waiting up for him. Hermione had procured a bowl filled with a thick yellow liquid.

“Here,” she said, and gave him the bowl. “It’s a solution of strained and pickled murtlap tentacles. It should help.”

Harry accepted it gratefully and sat down in the chair. He put his hand in the mixture and felt the same feeling of relief as when Madam Pomfrey had rubbed his raw hand in essence of murtlap. The cut did not heal, but the pain receded.

“How did you know?” he asked Hermione.

“Er — Professor McGonagall told me. I think… Oh, never mind.”

Harry was too tired to accept that answer. “What, Hermione?”
“I just think she must be having a hard time, knowing she can’t do anything to help you.”

“Watching her put Umbridge through her paces this morning certainly helped,” Ron said, grinning at the memory of Umbridge’s Transfiguration inspection. McGonagall had been sharp and immovable in the face of Umbridge. If she was at all intimidated by Umbridge’s new status as High-Inquisitor, she did not show it.

“Can’t she do anything?” Harry complained. Not that he wanted McGonagall to cause trouble on his behalf, certainly not with Umbridge who had more power than she deserved, but it didn’t stop him from feeling bitter about his situation. “Doesn’t Deputy Headmistress outrank High Inquisitor?”

“I don’t think it does.” Hermione chewed on her lip. “I think — well, I think maybe… this all got started because of Professor McGonagall.”

“What do you mean?”

“You told Professor McGonagall about your detention with Umbridge, and less than a week later, Umbridge is promoted. Remember what Percy said —”

“I don’t want to remember anything Percy said,” Ron snapped.

Hermione sighed. “He said that Umbridge was facing ‘aggressive resistance.’ I wouldn’t be surprised if she couldn’t handle Professor McGonagall criticizing her detention practices, and went to the Minister of Magic for power over her.”

“That’s horrible,” Neville said.

“So you’re saying this is my fault?” asked Harry.

“No, I’m not.” Hermione’s voice was quiet; she refused to rise to Harry’s bait. “This is Umbridge’s fault. Neville’s right. She’s horrible, and we’ve got to do something about her.”

“I suggested poison,” said Ron.

Neville whimpered, which Harry might’ve found funny, if Ron didn’t sound so horribly serious, and if Harry didn’t find himself agreeing with Ron.

“No,” Hermione said, as if she too understood Ron was serious. “I mean something about what a dreadful teacher she is, and how we’re not going to learn any defense from her at all.” She looked nervously at the boys, but none of them understood where she was going. She could not replace Umbridge, even if there was a better candidate for the position. Fudge would never allow it.

“I was thinking today,” Hermione continued with a nervous glance at Harry, “I was thinking that — maybe the time’s come when we should just — just do it ourselves.”

“Do what ourselves?” Harry asked, though now he had a sneaking suspicion he knew what she was going to say.

“Well — learn Defense Against the Dark Arts ourselves.”

Ron groaned. “Extra work? Harry and I are already behind on homework again and it’s only the second week.”

“This is much more important than homework!”
Ron and Harry openly stared at Hermione. Neville, however, looked thoughtful.

“I didn’t think there was anything in the universe more important than homework,” Ron said.

“Of course there is! This is about preparing ourselves, like Harry said in Umbridge’s first lesson, for what’s waiting out there. It’s about making sure we can really defend ourselves.”

Harry recognized the look in Hermione’s face. It was the sort of determination she’d gotten about S.P.E.W. last year, the same sort of fervor she’d had when she’d set out to find out how Rita Skeeter was eavesdropping on student conversations. Some sort of mad idea had seized her, and she was not going to let it go. Harry had a vague feeling he knew what her idea was, but he did not let it take shape. He did not want to be right.

“We can’t do much by ourselves,” Ron said. “I mean, alright, we can go and look up jinxes in the library and try to practice them, I suppose.”

“No, I agree,” said Hermione. “We’ve gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books. We need a teacher, a proper one who can show us how to use the spells and correct us if we’re going wrong.”

“But who?” Harry asked. “Anyone good enough is in the Order. They’ve got a lot to do, and wouldn’t it be suspicious if they kept coming up to Hogsmeade every weekend we’re allowed out? The Ministry would snatch them up real quick like they did to Sturgis.”

“I know, I’m not talking about anyone in the Order.” Hermione sighed heavily. “Isn’t it obvious?”

Harry thought it probably was obvious, and even Neville was staring right at him, like he ought to know the answer, but he refused to think the answer she wanted. “No,” he said, rather shortly. “It’s not obvious.”

“I’m talking about you, Harry.”

Neville nodded, almost as fervently as if it had been his idea all along. Harry was not ready to give in.

“About me what?”

“You teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry waited for Hermione to break into laughter, to say it was all a joke. She did not. He waited for Ron to tell her she was mad or way off base for some reason. He did not. In fact, he was considering it very seriously.

“That’s a thought,” he said.

“I’m not a teacher,” Harry protested.

“You’re the best in our year at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Neville.

“Better than a lot of upper years, too, I’d bet,” said Ron.

“No, I can’t be,” Harry said. “Hermione’s beaten me in every test —”

“Not in third year,” said Hermione. “Not in second year, either. But test results aren’t important, Harry, look what you’ve done!”
Harry was not sure if he was resisting the idea because he thought she was joking or he was too afraid to take the idea seriously. “How do you mean?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “C’mon, mate, let’s think. You save the Philosopher’s Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“That was luck, not skill —”

“You killed the basilisk and saved Ginny from Tom Riddle —”

“I had my Mum there, and Fawkes showed up —”

“You fought off about a hundred dementors,” Ron continued, raising his voice to talk over Harry.

“We had a Time-Turner!” Harry had to raise his voice to try and match Ron’s. “Without that —”

“And last year you fought You-Know-Who again —”

“Listen to me!” Harry shouted. Ron and Hermione were still grinning, like they’d won. Harry couldn’t figure out how to make them understand.

“Just listen, alright? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck — I didn’t know what I was doing half the time, I didn’t plan any of it, I just did whatever I could think of, and I nearly always had help —”

“You don’t have to be modest about it, Harry.” Neville was not smirking like Ron and Hermione, but his eyes were shining in a way that made Harry supremely uncomfortable.

“Don’t look at me like you know better than I do. I was the one who was there. I know what went on, alright? And I didn’t get through any of that because I was brilliant at Defense, I got through it all because — because help came at the right time or because I guessed right — but I just blundered through it all, I didn’t have a clue what I was doing — stop laughing!”

Harry had not meant to, but he stood so quickly, the bowl of murtlap essence crashed to the floor. Ron and Hermione’s smiles fell just as quickly; Neville backed away on the rug.

“You don’t know what it’s like — none of you — you’ve never had to face him! You think it’s just memorizing a bunch of spells and throwing them at him, like you’re in class or something? The whole time you know there’s nothing between you and dying except your own — your own brain and guts or whatever — like you can think straight when you know you’re about a second from being murdered, or tortured, or watching friends die, or —” He could not quite give voice to the fact that Voldemort had tried to Imperius him to murder Cedric. He still had not told anyone that. He did not know if he would ever tell anyone that. As he paused, he was struck with the idea that this was the very reason his parents had always refused to speak about the war. The stories that Harry had thought amazing as a child, stories of overcoming dark wizards and evil forces, were cast in a new light. Harry understood now how false that image of heroism truly was. He understood in a way his parents had never wanted him to understand.

Harry sank back into the chair. He still could not meet his friends’ eyes, so he stared into the fire. “I’m not alive because I’m clever, okay? Cedric got lucky — a switched wand mishap. I got lucky. If Voldemort hadn’t needed me, I’d be dead.”

“Don’t you see, Harry?” Neville asked in a small voice. “This is exactly why it’s got to be you. You’re the only one who understands. We need to know what it’s really like to face him — to face V-Voldemort.”
Hermione and Ron looked at Neville with wide eyes. Neville had never said Voldemort’s name before, in fact, he avoided it as much as Ron did.

“At least think about it, please?” Hermione repaired the bowl and returned the murtlap to it.

Though Harry’s head and hand throbbed, he was tempted to refuse the murtlap purely out of frustration. His pain, however, coupled with embarrassment from his outburst, won out, and he took the bowl from her.

“I’m off to bed.” Hermione tried to sound casual about it, but didn’t quite hide the nervous note at the end of her words. “Good night.”

Ron stood too. “Coming?” he asked Harry.

“In a minute.”

Ron nodded, and motioned for Neville to follow, rightly guessing that Harry needed some space. Rather unusually, Neville took the hint and said good night.

Harry sank low into the armchair and returned his hand to the murtlap. He had so much homework waiting for him, but it was already so late and he was so exhausted. He closed his eyes for only a moment’s rest, and found himself wandering a a hallway of corridors and locked doors. He woke some odd hours later, hand wrinkled, neck stiff and scar prickling. With a groan, Harry got up and put himself to bed, but he did not sleep much better there, plagued by the same pains and same dreams.

—— —— ——

It was a few weeks before Hermione brought the subject of Defense lessons up again. She waited for Harry to be finished with his detentions and for him and Ron to be largely caught up in their homework. He was still drowning under a mountain of assignments, but it was certainly easier to finish it all when he didn’t have seven hours of detention with Umbridge.

The large amount of homework still meant spending Saturday evenings in the library. Harry was tired from Quidditch and the dry text of *Asiatic Anti-Venoms* wasn’t very lively. At least Quidditch hadn’t been terrible that day. Angelina had not had to yell at Ron, and Harry felt like team spirits were lifting, if only marginally. He knew Angelina was glad to have him back at Quidditch practices, after so many nights in detention with Umbridge, and Harry was certainly glad to be there.

“I was wondering,” Hermione said, looking up from her diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage, “if you’d given anymore thought to Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry did not look up from his book. “Can’t forget it, can we, with that hag teaching us.”

“I meant the idea we had —”

“We who?” Ron interrupted.

“Oh, alright, I had, about you teaching us.”

“I think it’s a good idea.” Neville sounded nervous, but he set aside his book and looked at Harry.

Harry stared down at the ingredients of an antidote for the *Ichchadhari Naag*, wondering how long he could stall this conversation. Because he had thought about it, quite a bit actually. He’d had
plenty of long nights in detention with nothing to do, and thinking about teaching Ron, Hermione, and Neville what he knew had been a sort of solace. He’d found himself sorting through the spells he knew based on usefulness and difficulty.

“I’ve thought about it,” he finally said.

“And?” Hermione asked.


Now that Ron was sure Harry was not going to start yelling again, Ron looked a bit more comfortable with the conversation. “I thought it was a good idea from the start,” he said.

Harry looked at Hermione and Neville each, searching for any sort of doubt on their faces. He didn’t find any.

“You heard what I said about a load of it being luck, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “but all the same, there’s no point pretending that you’re not good at Defense Against the Dark Arts because you are. You were the only person last year who could throw off the Imperius Curse completely, you can produce a Patronus, you can do all sorts of stuff that full-grown wizards can’t. Viktor always said —”

Ron turned from Harry to Hermione so quickly that he almost hurt his neck. “Yeah? What did Vicky say?”

This was an old fight, and Harry did not want to see it start again. He considered picking his book back up and ignoring them until they were done.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “He said Harry knew how to do stuff even he didn’t, and he was in the final year at Durmstrang.”

“You’re not still in contact with him, are you?” asked Ron.

“So what if I am?” said Hermione. “I can have a pen pal if I —”

“He didn’t just want to be your pen pal.”

Neville, who had heard a much louder version of this fight in the Gryffindor common room after the Yule Ball, decided he, too, did not want to see a repeat performance. “What do you think, Harry?” he interrupted. “Would you teach us?”

Ron and Hermione stopped arguing. Harry took a moment to look at all three of them.

“Just you three, yeah?”

Hermione bit down on her lip. “Don’t fly off the handle again, Harry, please, but…. I really think you ought to teach anyone who wants to learn. I mean, we’re talking about defending ourselves against V-Voldemort — oh don’t be pathetic, Ron — it doesn’t seem fair if we don’t offer the chance to other people.”

His first thought was that surely no one else would want to learn from him, but Harry waited until his initial anger at this idea passed. He considered carefully who might want to learn from him. Ernie and Luna had already publicly said they believed him. Ginny might think it was a good idea, though Harry couldn’t see Fred or George taking it seriously. Would Cho be interested?
“I don’t know who else would want to learn,” Harry said, “but I mean, I guess if there were people who did….”

Hermione leaned closer and the boys followed suit to hear her better.

“Look,” she said, “you know the first weekend in October’s a Hogsmeade weekend? How would it be if we tell anyone who’s interested to meet us in the village and we can talk it over?”

“Why do we have to do it outside school?” asked Neville.

“I don’t think Umbridge would be very happy if she found out what we were up to. So?” she looked at Harry.

“Yeah, okay,” he finally agreed. “I’m in.”

Satisfied, Hermione returned to copying the diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage. Harry picked *Asiatic Anti-Venoms* up again, but he found he had trouble focusing on it. His mind was busy running over every Defense spell and jinx he had ever learned.

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When Harry got out of bed Saturday morning, he couldn’t help feeling fairly excited. He was worried about this meeting Hermione had organized, but he was looking forward to getting out of the castle. He did not know exactly when he had started to loathe the castle, but he knew Umbridge was at the root of his anger. It would feel good to breathe different air than her, and to do something she would utterly hate him for, but could do nothing about.

He wondered if he might see his family in Hogsmeade. He hadn’t heard from his parents apart from two letters. The cryptic letter from his father, and a less cryptic letter from his mother, telling him nothing particularly interesting, only that reassuring him that everyone was safe and they missed him. It had been nice, though not informative. It sounded to him like his parents were very busy. They probably wouldn’t have time to come by and see him. They probably didn’t even know it was a Hogsmeade weekend for students. Harry certainly hadn’t told them in any letters.

At breakfast, Harry asked Hermione, “How many people are coming?”

“Just a few,” Hermione said.

Harry still couldn’t imagine it would be anyone outside of their immediate friends, people who already knew about the Order. Everyone else thought he was mad. Though Neville had said he was bringing people, and would meet them later. Harry couldn’t imagine who Neville knew that would want to listen to him.

After breakfast, all students third year and above lined up at the castle gates with their permission slips. A few of the older students whose enchantment with the village had worn off were not present, but for the most part the castle would be emptied of its upper year students for the day.

Harry showed Filch his permission slip, and in return got a very dramatic and thorough sniff. Either satisfied he didn’t find anything or disappointed he could not get Harry into trouble, Filch let Harry pass.

“What was that about?” Ron asked, after he and Hermione had been let through.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you….,” Harry recounted the story of Filch and the supposed Dungbomb order. He left out the bits about Cho and Cedric, of course. He didn’t quite feel ready to share either of
“He said he was tipped off you were ordering Dungbombs?” Hermione asked. “But who had tipped him off?”

“Dunno.” Harry shrugged. “Maybe Malfoy thought it'd be a laugh.”

Hermione frowned. “Maybe.” She seemed far more bothered by it than Harry was, and remained quiet and thoughtful as they passed between the pillars that marked the exit of the Hogwarts grounds, watched by the winged boar statues above them.

“Where are we going anyway?” asked Harry as they followed the path to the village.

By now the tightly packed crowd of students at the entrance had thinned out into several different groups, spaced apart unevenly on the trail. Though they were not near enough to be overheard, Hermione kept her voice low. There was a strong wind today, and sound could carry.

“I’ve told the others to meet us in the Hog’s Head. It’s not on the main road. I think it’s a bit… you know… dodgy… by students don’t normally go in there, so I don’t think we’ll be overheard.”

Harry had never been to the Hog’s Head, but he’d heard more than one story about it. A few were from his father and Sirius, who had inadvertently mentioned it was a good place for a minor to get a bottle of firewhiskey without any trouble. It was also where Hagrid had once gotten a dragon egg.

When they walked into the Hog’s Head, Harry saw why it was such a good place for illicit activities. It was dimly lit, the only two sources of light were sunlight filtered through grimy windows and a chandelier in the center of the room with lamplights probably hadn’t been cleaned in centuries. The smell reminded Harry of an unkept barn or stable. The floor was earthy, though Harry scuffed it with his heel and realized there was indeed stone underneath. It was only covered in a layer of dirt.

The characters inside fit the decor: a man covered completely in bandages, sipping on something that looked more like fire than whiskey; an old witch with a veil over her face and a nose that stuck out like a beak; a couple of men in hoods at one table who might’ve been dementors if not for their thick Yorkshire accents; and a barman, who looked as old and dirty as his fine establishment. Harry thought there was something vaguely familiar about him, but Harry was very sure he’d never been here before.

“What?” he grunted at the students.

Harry wondered if students didn’t venture this far out of the way because of the Hog’s Head bad reputation or because the barman actively discouraged their business.

“Three butterbeers, please.” Hermione sounded fairly confident to Harry for someone so out of her element.

The barman pulled out three dusty bottles from beneath the counter. Harry wondered how long those bottles had been there. Maybe James and Sirius had been the last students to ever come here.

“Six sickles,” the barman said.

“I’ll get them,” said Harry, and exchanged the money for the drinks. When he, Ron, and Hermione, were seated at a table, he said, “I don’t know about this, Hermione.”

“I’ve told you, it’s just a few people,” she said. “Besides, we’re not technically breaking the rules. I
specifically asked Flitwick whether students were allowed to come in the Hog’s Head, and he said yes, but he advised me strongly to bring our own glasses. And I’ve looked up everything I can think of about study groups and homework groups and they’re definitely allowed. I just don’t think it’s a good idea if we parade what we’re doing.”

“Besides,” said Ron, with a look at the bar, “I bet we could get anything we’d like in here. I bet that bloke’d sell us anything, he wouldn’t care. I’ve always wanted to try firewhiskey —”

“You are a prefect,” Hermione snapped at him.

“Oh, alright,” Ron grumbled, and sipped at his butterbeer.  

Harry tapped his foot against the floor anxiously. “When did you tell people —”

The door opened before he could finish, and quite a few Hogwarts students stood in its frame. Certainly more than Harry had imagined, and more than Hermione had suggested.

Neville was first, with Dean Thomas and Lavender Brown. Right behind Lavender was Pavarti Patil with her twin sister Padma Patil, who apparently were more interested in learning Defense Against the Dark Arts from Harry than harboring any cold feelings about the Yule Ball. With Padma was Cho Chang and one of Cho’s friends Harry did not know. His heart started beating a little faster. Luna Lovegood was next, alone, but with Ginny close behind her, and a few Ravenclaw boys with her. Michael Corner, Terry Boot, and Anthony Goldstein were clustered together on Ginny’s heels. Then came the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team: Fred and George Weasley, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, and Angelina Johnson. With them was Lee Jordan. Then there were the Hufflepuffs, all together. Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan, who Harry probably should have expected. Hannah Abbot was there too, and Justin Finch-Fletchley, which surprised Harry. He and Justin had not always been friends. Zacharias Smith, from the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, also came with Justin, and brought the two Beaters from his team, Amber and Pearl Lais. Cedric was right behind them. Harry had not considered Cedric coming, especially not after their fight. He wondered if Cedric’s presence would make this thing they were doing better or worse. Next were Colin and Dennis Creevey, two brothers in Gryffindor who Harry should have expected, since they were interested in anything that had to do with Harry. Their presence did not surprise him, but what did surprise him was the last pair — a boy and a girl following in Slytherin robes. Harry did not know their names, but he recognized them. He’d seen them at their Defense Against the Dark Arts final last year, and they’d asked for James’s and Lily’s autographs.

“You said a couple people,” Harry hissed at Hermione. “A couple of people! Who even are these kids?”

“They look like they’re in Dennis’s year,” Hermione said, apparently unconcerned with the color of their robe linings. “Ron, do you think you could get some more chairs?”

While Ron and Cedric got chairs for everyone, Fred squeezed his way through the crowd and to the bar.

“Hi,” he said to the astonished barman. “Could we get —” he paused and turned to George, who counted quickly and gave him a number, “— thirty butterbeers?”

The barman did not seem pleased with the large number of students in his pub, despite the business they offered. Harry found himself thinking the barman really did keep his place so dirty as to discourage business from the students. But he did not kick them out. Instead, he pulled out a dusty case of butterbeers and Fred and George began distributing them.
“Cough up, everyone,” Fred said as he handed the bottles around. “I haven’t got enough gold for all of these.”

The large crowd of students exchanged piles of Knuts and Sickles for their butterbeers until the tab was settled and they began to take seats near Harry’s table. Neville sat down right next to Harry, looking rather excited, as he had when Hermione had first suggested the idea.

“Lot of people,” Neville said unnecessarily. He wiped the rim of his bottle with the sleeve of his robe. “Exciting, isn’t it?”

Exciting was not the word Harry would have used. Nerve wracking sounded better.

Harry took another sip of his butterbeer, trying to wet his dry mouth. “What did you tell people, Hermione?” he asked. “What are they expecting?”

“They just want to hear what you’ve got to say,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll speak to them first.”

The students settled into the chairs Cedric and Ron had gathered together, with no help from the barman. They stayed largely in the groups they had arrived in, clusters of twos and threes. Harry noticed Cho carefully sat as far away from Cedric as she could. She looked only in Harry’s direction, or her friend’s direction, and studiously avoided everywhere else. Fred and George leaned against one of the tables, towering over the others in seats. The Quidditch teams sorted themselves out from each other naturally. Competition was friendly, but not that friendly. And everyone gave the young Slytherins a wide berth, excepting Dennis Creevey, who seemed to be the only reason they were there at all. They looked up at Harry the same way they’d looked at his parents four months ago.

As they all settled in, chatter started to slow, until everyone was staring at Harry. Except Luna Lovegood, who was looking dreamily at the chandelier above them, or perhaps at something beyond it.

“Er — well, hi,” Hermione said, and Luna slowly turned and looked at Harry and Hermione.

“Well… erm… you know why you’re here,” Hermione continued. “Harry here had the idea —”

Harry glared at her. “— alright, I had the idea — that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defense Against the Dark Arts — and I mean, really study it, you know, not that rubbish that Umbridge is doing with us, because nobody could call that Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Hear, hear,” said Anthony Goldstein, and raised his bottle. Ernie Macmillan raised his in solidarity and took a sip like Hermione had given a toast.

Though Harry thought it a little silly, Hermione looked encouraged. “I thought it would be good if we took matters into our own hands. And by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells.”

“You want to pass your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L., too, though, I bet?” said Michael Corner.

“Of course I do, but I want more than that.” Hermione took a deep breath. “I want to be properly trained in defense because Lord Voldemort is back.”

Cho’s friend yelped and startled so violently, she sloshed butterbeer all down the front of her robes. Padma Patil shuddered. Ron turned his yelp into a cough. Everyone’s eyes turned to Harry.

“That’s the plan, anyway,” said Hermione. “If you want to join us, we need to decide how we’re
“Where’s the proof?” Zacharias Smith interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Hermione said, voice suddenly rather cold.

“Where’s the proof You-Know-Who’s back?”

Ron leaned forward rather aggressively. “Dumbledore believes it —”

“You mean Dumbledore believes him.” Zacharias nodded at Harry. “I think we’ve got the right to know exactly what makes him say You-Know-Who’s back.”

“I say he’s back.” Cedric said. He was quiet, but it seemed like the entire bar had stilled to listen, including the barman. “And if it wasn’t for Harry, I wouldn’t be here.”

“You yourself said you were unconscious most of it. How do you even know what really happened?”

Harry realized, suddenly, why so many people had come, and why Cedric’s word was not enough. They wanted to hear his story. They wanted him to tell them what had happened. It was what Seamus had been asking for that first night. Harry didn’t blame them for their curiosity, though it still burned the way it had when Hermione had presented this study group idea to him, and the way it had when Seamus had asked about it. He was not ready to tell them. Maybe he never would be.

“Look,” he said, and everyone turned from Cedric back to him, “I saw You-Know-Who, and I fought him. But if you don’t believe what Dumbledore told you, or Cedric, or me, I’m not wasting an afternoon trying to convince anyone. So if that’s what you’re here for, you might as well clear out.”

Harry was not sure if he was angrier at Zacharias for the questions or for Hermione for putting this all together. He folded his arms over his chest and glared over at her, waiting for people to leave or for Hermione to dismiss them, but neither happened.

“So,” Hermione finally said, voice high and nervous again, “like I was saying, if you want to learn some Defense, then we need to work out how we’re going to do it, how often we’re going to meet, and where we’re going to —”

“Is it true you can produce a Patronus?” interrupted Susan Bones.

Harry looked at her, and felt like he was seeing her for the first time since before they’d attended Hogwarts. She was taller, wore her hair in a long braid now, not unlike Padma and Pavarti. She was starting to look a lot like her aunt Amelia.

“Yeah,” he said, wondering if the story of his trial had been repeated around the Bones household. She wondered what sort of tone it had been retold in.

“A corporeal Patronus?” Her curiosity wavered between disbelief and polite interest.

“Er — yeah.”

“Blimey, Harry!” Lee said. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Mum told Ron not to spread it around,” said Fred. “She said you got enough attention as it was.”

“She’s not wrong,” Harry said, and a few people laughed.
“And did you kill a basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore’s office?” asked Terry Boot. “One of the portraits on the wall told me when I was in there last year….”

“Er — yeah, I did, yeah.”

The two Slytherins shifted a little closer in their seats.

“And in our first year,” said Neville, “he saved the Philosopher’s Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“Not to mention,” said Cho, “all the tasks he had to get through in the Triwizard Tournament last year — getting past dragons and merpeople and acromantulas and things.”

She was smiling at Harry, which turned his stomach into an Olympic gymnast. He noticed, though, that she did not mention Cedric had gone through the same tasks, that it was Cedric who must have told her about all those tasks, because Harry certainly hadn’t had that conversation with her, but he thought he might like to.

But Cho’s smile made it harder to say what he had already told Neville, Ron and Hermione. She thought he was brave, and he didn’t want her to lose that faith in him. But he also had to be completely honest.

“Look, I don’t want to sound like I’m trying to be modest or anything, but I had a lot of help with all that stuff.”

“Not with the dragon, you didn’t,” said Michael Corner. “It was a seriously cool bit of flying.”

“But —”

“And nobody helped you get rid of the dementors this summer,” said Susan.

“No, but the point I’m trying to make is —”

“Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?” asked Zacharias.

“Here’s an idea,” Ron snapped, “why don’t you shut your mouth?”

Harry appreciated Ron rising to his defense, but he did not like the way Ron and Zacharias looked like they might brawl right there in the bar.

“We’ve all turned up to learn from him, and now he’s telling us he can’t really do any of it,” Zacharias said, face now red.

Fred stepped closer to Zacharias and put a hand on the back of his chair. “That’s not what he said.”

“Would you like us to clean your ears out for you?” George offered, and also put a rather menacing hand on the back of Zacharias’s chair.

“He’s saying,” Cedric said, in his quiet voice that immediately dispelled the approaching fight, “that no one can stand alone. That’s what Dumbledore told us last year. That’s what the Sorting Hat said this year. Some of it’s luck, and some of it’s skill, but some of it is standing together.”

Harry wondered if this was Cedric’s apology for their fight earlier. It was rather good.

“Exactly, thank you, Cedric,” said Hermione. “So, are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?”
There were no noises of protest. Harry saw the two Slytherins nodding eagerly. He still didn’t know how to feel about them being there. Surely no one in Slytherin house believed what he had to say, though he knew these two looked up to his parents in some way. Was that really enough to make them believe his story when surely all their friends didn’t?

“The next question,” Hermione said, “is how often we do it. I really don’t think there’s any point in meeting less than once a week.”

“Hang on,” said Angelina, “we need to make sure this doesn’t clash with our Quidditch practice.”

“No, nor with ours,” said Cho.

“Nor ours,” said Amber Lais.

“I’m sure we can find a night that suits everyone,” said Hermione, “but you know, this is rather important. We’re talking about learning to defend ourselves against Voldemort’s Death Eaters —”

“Well said,” said Ernie. “Personally, I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we’ll do this year, even with our O.W.L.s coming up.” He looked around, like he was waiting for someone to disagree with him. Harry was sorely tempted to, just for the sake of disagreeing with Ernie, but felt he wasn’t in the right position to make that kind of joke.

“I, personally,” Ernie continued, even though no one had challenged him, “am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher upon us at this critical period. Obviously, they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give as a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells —”

“We think the reason Umbridge doesn’t want us trained in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” sid Hermione, “is that she’s got some… mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he’d mobilize us against the Ministry.”

No one laughed at this news, though they all looked surprised. Everyone except Luna Lovegood.

“Well that makes sense,” she said in her dreamy voice. “After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army.”

“What?” asked Harry. He felt like the Order would have known if Fudge had a private army.

“Yes,” Luna said, “he’s got an army of heliopaths.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Hermione snapped.

“Yes, he has.”

“What are heliopaths?” asked Neville.

“They’re spirits of fire, great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of —”

“They don’t exist, Neville,” said Hermione.

“Yes they do!” Luna shot back. Harry had never heard Luna sound angry before. He was surprised.

“I’m sorry, but where’s the proof of that?”

“There are plenty of eyewitness accounts, just because you’re so narrow-minded you need to have
everything shoved under your nose before you —”

“Hem, hem.”

Harry jumped in his seat, as did several others, and turned to the source of the noise, but it was only Ginny. She was just a marvelous mimic.

Now that Ginny had everyone’s attention, she said, “Weren’t we trying to decide how often we’re going to meet and get Defense lessons?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “yes, of course.”

“Once a week sounds cool,” said Lee.

“As long as —”

“Yes, yes,” Hermione interrupted Angelina. “We know about the Quidditch. The other thing to decide is where we’re going to meet.”

There was a long pause. Even Harry didn’t have any ideas.

“Library?” Katie Bell finally suggested.

“I can’t see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in the library,” said Harry.

“Maybe an unused classroom?” tried Dean.

“Yeah, McGonagall might let us have hers,” said Ron. “She did when Harry was practicing for the Triwizard Tournament.”

Harry was not so sure McGonagall would have the power to grant the use of her classroom. Not if what Hermione had said was true, about Umbridge’s position being a direct result of McGonagall’s interference.

“Right, well, we’ll try to find somewhere,” said Hermione. “We’ll send a message round to everybody when we’ve got a time and place for the first meeting.”

Hermione took a piece of parchment and a quill from her bag. “I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we’re doing. So if you sign, you’re agreeing not to tell Umbridge what we’re up to.”

Fred took the quill and eagerly put his name down, then passed it to George. Several others, however, looked nervous about putting their names on parchment. It was one thing to talk about rebellion. It was another thing to record your participation. Harry wondered if there was a list like this of members of the Order. He knew there was at least a photograph.

“Er —” Zacharias eyed the parchment. “I’m sure Ernie will tell me when the next meeting is.”

But Ernie did not look keen to sign, either. “I —” He looked up at Hermione. “Well, we’re prefects! And if this list was found… well, I mean to say… you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out….”

“You just said this group was the most important thing you’d do this year,” Harry said coldly. Ernie had always been the tattletale when they were children, and while he did not expect Ernie to tattle on this group, he had thought that Ernie had grown a backbone these last few years.
“Ernie,” said Hermione, “do you really think I’d leave that list lying around?”

“No, no of course not. But —”

Cedric got to his feet. He said nothing, but he took the quill from Ginny and signed his name right beneath hers. There were no protests after that. Everyone signed. Cho’s friend — Marietta Edgecombe, she wrote on the paper — looked at Cho like she blamed her for being dragged here, but still signed the paper. The two young Slytherins signed eagerly, apparently unconcerned with the severity of Hermione’s tone. They wrote down their names as Atalanta Shafiq and Hugh Ward. Zacharias Smith was the last to sign, but he did sign.

“Well, time’s ticking on,” said Fred. “George, Lee, and I have got items of a sensitive nature to purchase. We’ll be seeing you all later.”

They waved goodbye and slowly, people began to leave. Ginny and Michael left together, the other Ravenclaw boys on their heels. Neville waved goodbye to Dean and Lavender, who left together while Neville stayed with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Cho made a fuss of checking over everything in her bag, stalling for something, but her friend was impatiently tapping her foot at the door. Cho waved at Harry and left.

Cedric left with only a hasty goodbye. It was not quite impolite, but Harry had expected more after everything Cedric had done to stand up for him today. He remembered what Hermione had said about not wanting to draw attention to the fact that they were all friends. He figured he was just going to have to get used to Cedric being friendly in private and brief in public.

He, Ron, Hermione, and Neville were the last to leave.

“I think it went quite well,” said Hermione, as she linked one arm through Harry’s and the other through Neville’s.

“That Zacharias bloke’s a wart,” said Ron.

“I don’t like him much either, but he overheard me talking to Ernie and Hannah at the Hufflepuff table, and he seemed really interested in coming, so what could I say? But the more people the better, really. I mean, Michael Corner and his friends wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t been going out with Ginny.”

“He’s what?” Ron’s ears went red and he looked at Hermione like she’d stolen his wand. “She’s going out with — my sister’s going — what do you mean, Michael Corner?”

“That’s why he and his friends came, I think. Well, they’re obviously very interested in learning Defense, but I think if Ginny hadn’t told Michael —”

“When did this — when did she —?”

“They met at the Yule Ball and they got together at the end of last year.”

“But I thought she fancied Harry!”

Hermione sighed. “She used to like Harry, but she gave up on him months ago. Not that she dislikes you, of course,” she said to Harry.

Harry was unbothered by this. He was still thinking about Cho’s wave. But it did make something click for him. “So that’s why she talks to me now?”
“Yes, exactly — oh!”

Harry looked up at the end of the path and was surprised to see Sirius walking towards them. There didn’t seem to be anyone with him. Sirius waved, and soon, they were close enough to talk.

“I thought that was you four,” Sirius said with a wide smile. “Surprised to see you all coming back from the Hog’s Head. Ron, Hermione, aren’t you prefects now?” He winked at them. “But I am proud of you, Neville. I promise I won’t tell your parents. They’d throw quite the fit, wouldn’t they?”

Neville swallowed hard. “We didn’t do anything.”

“Well then what’s the point of going down to the Hog’s Head?” Sirius laughed.

“What are you doing here?” asked Harry. “Are you by yourself?”

“Yeah, I was just looking for something at the cottage. Couldn’t find it.” Sirius shrugged, entirely unconcerned. “I’ll have to check your house, next. Thought I’d get a drink, but the Three Broomsticks is crawling with students. I should’ve picked a different weekend. But the barman at the Hog’s Head is an old friend, anyway, so I thought I’d say hello. What is it you four are doing here, if it’s not reinstating an old butterbeer trade a certain pair of Gryffindors ran back in the day?”

He grinned at them, and Harry was excited to tell Sirius that they were in fact doing something not technically against the rules, but still rather rebellious.

“Hermione had the idea to put together a Defense Against the Dark Arts Club,” Harry said. “She thinks I could teach the others some stuff, and, well, people seem interested.” He did not say there were thirty-three names on a piece of parchment committed to rebellion. That sounded a little too much like bragging.

“We aren’t learning anything in class,” Hermione said. “And it’s important that we’re ready to fight.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “You’re quite right. I think it’s a brilliant idea.” He looked over all four of them with pursed lips. “Let’s see if I can predict what everyone’s parents would say….”

“Don’t tell them,” Neville said. “Please.”

Sirius laughed. “Honestly, I think your mum would be proud of you, Neville. Your dad, too.”

This seemed to steel Neville a bit. He looked like a good deal of weight had dropped from his shoulders.

“You ought to be careful, though,” Sirius advised. “Don’t underestimate the kind of backfire this might have if you get caught.”

“We know,” Ron said. “Umbridge already made herself High Inquisitor.”

“Yes, we saw the front page too.” Sirius frowned and looked at Harry. Harry could not help but feel that Sirius’s gaze saw a lot more than Harry wanted to reveal to Sirius. He folded his arms, hiding the scabs on the back of his hand.

Sirius finally looked away from Harry and checked the path around them for listeners. “If there’s anything you four need to tell me, or that I can pass on to your parents….”

Harry thought of several things he wanted to tell his parents, but he let all of them die in his throat.
There was nothing to be done, nothing that could be done about Umbridge. There was no point in worrying Sirius or his parents. There was no point in asking Sirius about Cho or Cedric. And if there had been any news on Sirius’s end, it would have already been shared.

“I think we’re good,” said Harry.

Sirius hesitated, like Harry might change his mind. Harry did not.

“Alright then, if you’re sure,” he said. “Have a good weekend. Be careful, alright?”

“We will,” Harry said. He was grateful Sirius said, “Be careful,” and not, “Keep your head down.” He knew the sentiment was probably the same, but it allowed him to believe that Sirius would approve of his rebellion against Umbridge. At least Sirius approved of their secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group. That was encouraging.

They said their goodbyes to Sirius and made their way back to the High Street in Hogsmeade. Hermione said she needed new quills, and so the four ducked into Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop. Hermione selected a black and gold feathered quill while the boys waited at the front. Through the window, they saw Ginny and Michael coming out of Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop.

“I don’t like him,” Ron said.

“Of course you don’t,” Harry laughed.

“This is probably why she didn’t tell you,” Neville said. “She knew you’d act like this.”


Neville looked to Harry for help, but Harry only shrugged. There was nothing to do when Ron was like this. They could only let Ron wear his temper out.

When Hermione returned, purchase made, Ron was still harping on about Michael and Ginny. Hermione rolled her eyes and fell in step beside Harry. She let Ron talk Neville’s ear off instead of hers.

“Speaking of Michael and Ginny,” she said to Harry in a low voice, “what about you and Cho?”

Harry’s face grew very warm, despite the nippy air. “What do you mean?”

“She just couldn’t keep her eyes off of you, could she?”

Harry was about to protest that she had been dating Cedric, and wasn’t there some sort of code of honor about that, that he couldn’t date the girls his friends dated? But Cedric had said that Cho liked him. Wasn’t that as much a sign of approval as anything? If Cho wanted to date him, that was her choice. And it really seemed like she wanted to date him.

Their walk back to the castle, despite knowing that what he was going back to held little fun, was the lightest Harry had felt in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

Remus has a long day of recovery with lots of naps and lots of unwanted feelings.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Welcome back! Or just Welcome for newcomers. I'm so happy you're all here.

What a break! I took a trip to New York City this weekend and saw "Puffs." I was absolutely blown away. If you have any chance to go to New York to see a show, SEE PUFFS! It's so on point with Harry Potter canon that it actually meshes almost perfectly with my AU. Incredible! And Cedric Diggory shook my hand. In character! He just, appeared next to me, and was like, "I'm Cedric Diggory," and shook my hand and ran on stage. I... I almost cried.

So if you can go to New York to see Puffs, please do it! It was such a good experience, such a fun show. And you can expect small hints from Puffs to get dropped into the AU. Like Wayne Hopkins, Oliver Rivers, and Megan Jones doing shenanigans in the background. Maybe I'll even write a Wayne chapter... It'd be a fun exercise, at least. And to anyone who hasn't seen the show, it would feel like I just selected a random Hufflepuff and gave him a chapter.

Special shout out to my beta, ageofzero, who beta'd this chapter on like 0 notice. If you wanna know why it's late (I mean, it's technically still May 5 for three hours so it's not really late), it's because I finished it like an hour ago and they were like, "Yeah I can totally beta this on a Friday night with no warning ofc." They are amazing is what I'm saying. Like, SO amazing.

So, without further ado, enjoy this chapter. Are we going to switch back and forth between Harry and Marauders? Maybe? For now, just have more Remadora and Wolfstar angst, because I know that's what you all came to this AU for, right?

Remus was so tired these days. He was used to being tired — the full moon drained a good deal of energy from him each month — but since Voldemort had returned, he’d experienced a new level of exhaustion he hadn’t felt in a long time.

The night Voldemort had returned, Remus had felt a long-forgotten sort of thrill. He could not pretend war was not, in some way, thrilling. He knew Sirius felt the same, at first anyway. They’d rushed in together to rescue Regulus, Lily had joined them, and there was no denying there was a certain high that came with fighting against evil.

But that high never lasted long.

It hadn’t during the first war. They’d begun fighting against Voldemort and his Death Eaters right
out of school, and by the end of the first year, Remus had grown more distant from his friends than ever before. The thrill of battle, of winning, waned as friends began to die, as friends were forced to disappear into hiding, as his body began to grow wearier and wearier with each passing month.

This time, it was the same. And this time, they had Harry to worry about.

Remus had told Lily several times he did not blame her, James, and Sirius for keeping the prophecy from him. He understood why they had made their decision. Lily insisted over and over again that she wished he were upset with them, that he had every right to be upset with them. Remus and Lily did not fight often, but that was one half-spoken argument that had never quite been patched up between them.

Though he and Lily had not discussed that fissure in a while, a new one had begun to form. Remus was quite certain the time had come to share the prophecy with Harry. He was not like Sirius, who could argue for hours on end with James, who had learned all manner of techniques for communicating displeasure, everything from loud shouting to a cold shoulder. Remus, for the most part, kept his anger quiet, reasoned through his emotions, and worked towards problem-solving. Lately, though, Lily had become a stone wall who refused to discuss Harry or the prophecy.

He knew she was scared; he was scared, too. There was no telling what would happen to Harry. But it was obvious to Remus the time for secrecy had come to an end. Harry had faced far more than he ever should have at his age, and the best way to protect him now was to involve him.

Unfortunately, James and Lily had Dumbledore in their corner. Remus could not remember a time Dumbledore had given his opinion on whether or not Harry ought to know the prophecy — he’d always insisted that was James and Lily’s decision — but over the summer, Dumbledore had given severe instructions that Harry was to know as little as possible. He did not say why, and if James and Lily knew why, they had not shared it with anyone.

It annoyed Remus, but he trusted Dumbledore, and he trusted James and Lily. He could be displeased, but he was not going to start a shouting match in the parlor over it, certainly not on the morning after a full moon.

Regulus and Lily had suggested more than once that he go upstairs to bed, but Remus knew he would not be able to rest until James and Sirius had returned.

James and Sirius had stayed with him through the night, as Padfoot and Prongs, of course. The Wolfsbane Potion made Animagus forms unnecessary, but there was something nostalgic about them being together that way. Even Regulus spent the night as a cat, perched on top of the grandfather clock in the hallway. Only Lily had remained perfectly human.

But first thing in the morning, James and Sirius had left. It was not Order business. They were only going back to Styncon Garden to look for those mirrors James and Sirius had made in school together. Remus wanted to think that made them safer, and he knew Lily wanted to think that too, but it only worried them more. As protected as Styncon Garden was, it was somewhere an ill-intentioned person would go looking for well-intentioned people. It was somewhere that someone had sent dementors after James, Lily, and Harry.

They of course tried to keep up the pretense of relaxation, though for whose sake, Remus wasn’t sure. He and Lily were not engaged in conversation, each waiting alertly for the door to open, for James and Sirius’s laughter to fill the quiet space. Hopefully it would be laughter that came in with them; Remus was so tired of the two of them fighting.

Lily had a copy of the Quibbler in her lap, something Tonks had brought by and done loud absurd
and dramatic readings of to keep people’s spirits up. Remus’s favorite had been the description of Fudge’s army of heliopaths done with Snape’s face and his slow, drawling voice, complete with ridiculously long pauses. It was far too reminiscent of Snape’s condescending reports to the Order and had the entire house in stitches for most of the evening. Even Regulus had quoted it over sunrise breakfast just a few hours ago.

But Lily wasn’t reading the Quibbler anymore than Remus was filling out the crossword from the Daily Prophet. Though he refused to actually read the paper these days — someone else in the Order could take up the job of being informed about the Ministry’s coverups and lies — he did still like to take the crossword from the back to keep himself busy on particularly quiet days. Quiet days led to anxious days, so it was good to keep busy. Today, though, it wasn’t working.

The only one who wasn’t surreptitiously glancing at the door every few minutes was Regulus, who seemed fairly invested in his book. At least, he was turning pages every few minutes, where Lily hadn’t turned a page in an hour. Though Remus did not think Regulus was the sort to worry about James and Sirius on a slight excursion, it was possible that Regulus was simply a better liar than Lily.

Remus read through the list of “down” clues for the third time, but they were no more familiar than they had been the first time. He pressed his cup of tea to his forehead, like the warmth might make his headache go away, though he knew perfectly well this headache would last for the rest of the day, no matter what he did to relieve it.

The front door bell rang throughout the house, and in concert with it, the portraits began shrieking.

Remus winced, headache pounding with the noise. Regulus did not look up from his book, but the faintest crease formed on his forehead. Lily stood with an exasperated sigh, and Remus was certain there was disappointment on her face. He felt similarly.

James and Sirius wouldn’t have rung the bell.

Remus followed Lily into the hallway and began pulling curtains over portraits. For a moment, Remus thought Regulus would leave them to it, but eventually he joined them, face as unreadable as ever as he began to cover portraits.

Lily cast a futile Silencio over Walburga Black’s portrait on her way to answer the door. It was impervious to the charm, but it did not stop her from trying out of frustration.

Remus watched Lily pull the door open, a small part of him hoping that perhaps it was James and Sirius after all, and they had gotten it into their heads that ringing the bell would be a humorous nuisance.

But it was not James and Sirius that stepped inside, and yet Remus was not disappointed.

“Wotcher, Lily,” Tonks said with a wide smile.

Her hair was its traditional pink today, and Remus stopped himself before he could even think that the pink was his favorite. She was also dripping wet as she stepped inside. Rain was coming down in torrents, and Remus wondered where Tonks’s umbrella was.

“Good morning, Tonks,” Lily said, and put no effort into masking her irritation. “Could you not ring the doorbell in the future?”

“Oh — sorry, I completely forgot — I’ll remember next time.”
Remus suppressed a smile as he and Regulus threw their effort into closing the curtains over Walburga Black’s portrait. Tonks would not remember next time, as she had not remembered over the course of the summer.

“Is everything alright?” Lily tapped her wand on Tonks and she dried instantly.

“Oh, yes,” Tonks yawned and followed them back into the parlor. “Just came off work. I’ve got watch this afternoon though, so I thought I’d stop here for now, if that’s alright.”

“I’m afraid we aren’t much for entertaining, but we’re happy to have you.”

“It’s more her home than yours,” Regulus said as he retrieved his book from the tea table.

Lily’s cheeks colored ever so slightly. Remus was not sure if she was embarrassed by being called out for acting like this home was hers, or if she was just irritated with Regulus for dismissing her polite conversation. Knowing Lily, it was probably a bit of both.

“How was work?” Remus asked quickly, hoping to head off a fight between Regulus and Lily.

“So long,” she yawned again and collapsed into an empty chair. “Scrimgeour’s giving us more work than ever. Like he knows something’s up.” She stretched, then curled up in the chair like she might take a nap right there. “I’ll be relieving Arthur. Then Molly’s taking over tonight, so she might stop in before she relieves him.”

“Would you like somewhere to rest?” Remus asked and picked up his tea.

“I’m good right here. If I doze off, just wake me around noon.”

Remus and Lily settled back into their quiet anxiety, listening for each creak in the house, hoping one of them signaled James and Sirius’s return; Regulus was once again intent on his book. Tonks was either too exhausted to keep up her usual energy and conversation, or she picked up on the waves of anxiety that Remus and Lily were giving off. She was uncharacteristically quiet, and within minutes she had fallen asleep in the chair with her mouth half-open.

Tonks’s nap did not last long. The bell rang, and the portraits sprang to life. Tonks was startled awake, looking like death was chasing her. Remus, had his head been clearer, might have laughed.

Lily stood with a groan. Regulus followed her and the two of them began to cover the portraits again.

“That is really annoying,” Tonks said as she started to help. “I mean, I knew it was bad, I’ve knocked enough stuff over, but, with the doorbell, it’s so startling.”

“It is,” Remus agreed with a faint smile.

“I was in the middle of a dream about hippogriffs and lambs.” She covered a portrait and yawned again. By now, they’d reached the doorway. It was easier to cover portraits along the hall and then answer the door, rather than let Walburga Black get carried away with insulting the house’s guest.

Regulus pulled the door open, this time for Mundungus. Remus swallowed down a sigh. He’d really been hoping it would be James and Sirius, laughing about ringing the doorbell.

For a moment Regulus blocked the doorway and eyed Mundungus, like he was looking for stolen merchandise. He eventually seemed satisfied, though, and stepped aside for a soaked Mundungus to enter.
“Wotcher, ‘Dung,” said Tonks. “Haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

Mundungus took off his cap and wrung it out in the doorway. Regulus wrinkled his nose and vanished the puddle it made.

“Been busy,” Mundungus said and put his damp cap back on his head.

“Been on a bender more like,” Tonks snorted.

Remus hid a smile.

Lily tapped her wand on his shoulder, and he dried as she had dried Tonks earlier.

“Thanks, doll,” he said, and it was Lily’s turn to wrinkle her nose. “Got anything warm? Colder than a veela with a broken heart out there.” Mundungus rubbed his hands together. “Got a juicy report for the Order, I’ll tell ya.”

Remus doubted it, but Lily said, “I’m sure we’d all love to hear it. We’ve got plenty of tea, if you’d like. Shall we go into the kitchen?”

“The kids are starting their own Defense Against the Dark Arts group,” Mundungus said as he followed Lily downstairs. “I heard ‘em talkin’ abou’ it in Hogsmeade. Stickin’ it to Umbridge. I wouldn’ be surprised if she already knows abou’ it too — practically announced it to the bleedin’ pub.”

“We already know,” Lily sighed. “Sirius told us Saturday evening. You realize it’s Monday morning? Your information is two days late.”

“What? I can’t help it, can I? It’s a busy job, it is. Can’t just stop in ’ere every hour.”

“Once a day wouldn’t kill you,” Tonks said.

“Well did you hear what Umbridge’s up and done now? Banning all clubs, so their little group is illegal now. They’ll get in a lot of trouble if they go through with it.”

Lily sighed, and Remus was certain they were thinking the same thing. Harry would not let a little rule from a woman like Umbridge stop him from doing what he thought was right. If Harry had set his mind on starting a Defense Against the Dark Arts group to help his peers learn to fight, there was nothing that could stop him. He was too much like his parents in that way.

Remus waited until Tonks, Lily, and Mundungus had all filed into the kitchen. Regulus, it seemed, had slunk away, knowing he wasn’t welcome when it came to Order business. Remus wondered how much of Mundungus’s speech Regulus had already overheard. Likely all of it. Mundungus wasn’t one for discretion.

“Is there any other news?” Lily asked, and sat down at the kitchen table. With a wave of her wand, she conjured fresh set of tea for everyone.

Remus tried to listen while Mundungus rattled on about some conversations he’d overheard in the Hog’s Head this weekend. Remus had a feeling Mundungus was simply trying to make himself feel more important and to ease Lily’s displeasure with him. Remus had watched multiple men talk for hours about nothing of importance, trying to elicit any sort of change in Lily’s features. Few had ever been successful.

James and Sirius were notable outstanding survivors of this challenge, though James had failed a
lot before he learned how draw Lily out of her temper. It was, Remus mused, not unlike drawing Sirius out of one of his sulky moods. It was no real wonder that James had learned how to love Lily so quickly and easily. It must have been like falling in love with his best friend.

Remus forced himself to open his eyes and listen to Mundungus, but he was distracted by Tonks, sitting behind Mundungus. Mundungus was complaining of some minor injury he’d received in the line of duty, perhaps thinking he could tap into Lily’s sympathy, and Tonks had twisted her features into an exaggerated version of Mundungus and was dramatically miming his complaints.

Remus burst into laughter.

Mundungus abruptly stopped talking and turned to look at Tonks, but she had already returned her face to its usual shape. She smiled politely at Mundungus, even looking a little confused, like she didn’t understand what was happening anymore than he did.

Lily rubbed her forehead, hiding a small smile behind her hand.

Mundungus, unable to figure out what had happened, wrapped up his complaints with a small grumble. “Well, that’s my report. You lot got any breakfast around here?”

Lily finished off her tea and stood. “We ate at sunrise. But if you’re hungry, I’m sure I can ask Kreacher to fix something for you — or, ask Regulus to ask Kreacher to do it.”

“Oh, let me try,” said Tonks. “I’m family, after all.”

“Don’t be cruel to him —”

Tonks laughed. “I would never.”

“Didn’t you once try to look like Regulus and ask him to fix you tea?” Remus asked.

“It didn’t work, did it? House-elves know. I can’t fool them.”

“If he didn’t listen to you then, why would he listen to you now?”

“I could just try it, couldn’t I? Where is the little bugger anyway?”

Before Tonks could begin her search for Kreacher, there were footsteps upstairs, too heavy to be Regulus. Remus wanted it to be James and Sirius, but he was fairly certain it was only one set. It didn’t stop him from hoping, though.

There was a knock at the kitchen door and Tonks got up to open it for Molly Weasley.

Molly smiled brightly at them, though Remus was familiar with the worry in the lines in her forehead.

“Good morning,” she said, and removed her hat. “You’re all up so early. I wasn’t expecting so many people to be here already.”

“We never went to bed,” Lily confessed.

“Oh, dears, you have to get some rest. You’ll wear yourselves to the bone.” Molly Weasley took over the kitchen so suddenly and completely there was no need to ask for Kreacher. She prepared coffee and a full breakfast and even cleaned the kitchen. She refused help — Lily and Remus were too tired to help, Tonks and Mundungus were simply more trouble than help.
Remus had to admit, he felt a lot better after a second breakfast. Still worried about James and Sirius, still exhausted, still full of aches, but that all seemed a little bit easier to manage when he was full of good food, warm coffee, and a good laugh with friends over a delicious meal.

“You really should sleep, Remus,” Lily said, as Molly instructed Tonks and Mundungus to clean the table.

“So should you,” he said, though with each passing hour, bed seemed more and more appealing. Lily did not say she would sleep when James and Sirius were back safely, and she didn’t need to.

“Did you save any of the food for Regulus?” Lily asked.

“There’s a plate here if he’d like it,” Molly said.

“Regulus Black, sitting down and eating with a large group of people?” Tonks snorted. “I don’t think he even eats. Unless you take it up to him and leave it next to his coffin.”

Remus could not help laughing again. Tonks’s grin widened as he did so, and he was struck by the thought that she enjoyed his laughter as much as he enjoyed her jokes. He felt suddenly self-conscious of his laugh.

“Well, I left my magazine in the parlor,” Lily said, and Remus knew she only wanted to be where she could hear the door.

“My crossword is there too. Perhaps we could move upstairs?”

Tonks and Molly put away the last of the dishes while Mundungus pulled a bottle of wine out of his cloak — Regulus had lately charmed the house’s stores of wine so only Black family members had access to them — and they all went upstairs.

Lily opened her magazine, but did not read it, instead preferring a conversation with Tonks and Molly. Remus noticed, though, the way her ear kept turning to the door at every creak.

Mundungus wasn’t much for conversation, but he seemed happy to sit and drink somewhere warm, rather than out on the rainy streets. Remus, neither, was much for conversation. He listened to the women talk until their distinctive voices blurred into general chatter.

Remus did not know when he fell asleep, but his headaches, his exhaustion, and the steady sound of rain against the windows eventually lulled him into a fairly deep nap. He was dimly aware of sounds around him, but they seemed distant, like echoes at the end of a long corridor. What eventually drew him out of his slumber was the sound of deeper voices that, though he could not understand them, jarred something in his chest, a surge of emotion that pushed him into consciousness.

Remus opened his eyes and rubbed them. He looked around the parlor, noticing first that Tonks’s seat was vacated, and the parlor was empty. How long had she been gone? How long had he been asleep?

The second thing he noticed was the sound of James and Sirius’s laughter in the hallway, followed by Lily hissing for them to be quiet.

“Remus can sleep through anything,” Sirius said.

“The portraits, git,” James said back, and there was laughter again, though this time it was more
like quiet giggling.

James and Sirius were home. They were alive. And they seemed to be in a fairly childish mood. That was alright with Remus. It was a relief to have a break from the tension that had permeated the house these last few months.

“You know Harry’s going to do it anyway?” James’s voice carried into the parlor.

“I know,” Lily sighed. “Do you think he should?”

“He absolutely shouldn’t,” Molly said. “He and Ron and Hermione and Neville could get into a lot of trouble if they got caught, and it could come down on our heads, not just theirs. This isn’t a matter of detentions!”

“I know, I know,” Lily sighed. “But it’s nice to think that Harry’s finding an outlet, isn’t it? Something to do, something that feels useful.”

Remus realized they were talking about Umbridge and her newest rule. A conversation about Umbridge was not a conversation he wanted to get involved in, not right now. He leaned his head against the window pane, the cool glass numbing some of his headache, and closed his eyes as their footsteps carried past the parlor.

“He’s out cold,” James murmured. “Should we put him upstairs?”

“He might go,” Lily said, “now that you’re both home safe.”

“I’ll get him,” Sirius said, “and find Regulus. I’ll meet you downstairs in a bit.” The collective sound of footsteps shuffled further down the hallway, but one pair approached Remus.

Remus considered feigning sleep as Sirius gently shook his shoulder, but it really didn’t seem worth it.

“I’m awake,” he mumbled, without opening his eyes. “Glad you’re okay.”

“We didn’t have any trouble. We did get distracted digging through old stuff, though. Found our first prototype of the Marauders Map.”

“Merlin, I thought we burned that.”

“It was as rude as ever. James is thinking about giving it to Snivellus for Christmas.”

“Lily will talk him out of it.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Want to continue your nap upstairs? Probably a bit more comfortable than the chair.”

Remus didn’t answer right away. He didn’t particularly feel like moving. He thought, really, he’d rather be with his friends, talking. “Did Tonks leave?” he asked.

There was the faintest pause, and Remus was glad his eyes were closed so he wouldn’t have to interpret the expression on Sirius’s face.

“She wasn’t here when James and I got back. How is she?”

“Same as ever.” Remus stretched his arms over his head. “I suppose I should get some real rest.”
He stood and rubbed at a crick in his neck. “What time is it?”

“Just after lunch. Are you hungry?”

Remus shook his head. He was still full from Molly’s breakfast. “Just tired.” He stifled a yawn and started for the stairs. “Did you say Regulus was missing?”

“Lily says she hasn’t seen him since this morning. He’s probably sleeping, since he was up all night, too. Or he’s scrounging around in the attic, I guess. Don’t know what he’s looking for, but he’s been looking for something. Won’t give me a straight answer when I ask him, though.”

“Does Regulus ever give a straight answer for anything?” Remus smiled and thought it was the sort of joke Tonks might have made if she’d been there.

“You could ask him if he wanted a cup of tea and he’d just ask you for the time,” Sirius agreed, though he didn’t look as amused by it as Remus was.

On their way upstairs they checked Regulus’s room and found him sleeping soundly in his bed.

“I suppose we shouldn’t wake him,” Sirius said.

“No.” Remus closed the bedroom door as quietly as he could manage. He headed across the hall to Sirius’s room, stifling another yawn.

“Do you need a Padfoot for your aches?”

Remus didn’t know which part of the question was funny to him, but he stifled a laugh. “I’m alright, Sirius. A long nap is all I need.”

“Sweet dreams then,” and Sirius went back downstairs.

Remus kicked his shoes off but did not bother undressing. It was only a nap, after all. He did not expect to sleep very long, probably wake up in time for dinner. The rain was still pouring hard outside, and a wind rattled the panes. Remus remembered another stormy night, a Christmas Eve, also at James’s, where he’d been laid up with a broken leg after the full moon. He’d stupidly fallen into a gully while he, Prongs, Padfoot, and Wormtail were running around the Potter’s estate. He couldn’t remember where James and Peter had gone, but he remembered the crackling wood of the fireplace, and he remembered being alone with Sirius.

Remus brushed his fingers over his lips, tracing the thin white line that separated his bottom lip, a scar from a run in with Padfoot’s claws. He remembered Tonks jokingly asking if he’d tried to kiss an occamy.

With a heavy sigh, Remus rolled over and tried to sleep. He was too old for this. Too old to worry about his scars, to worry about his feelings like this. Things were fine as they were, and that was all there was to it.

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When Remus woke up, the storm was still raging, but the house was dark. There were soft snores to his left and Remus did not have to look to know there was a large Irish Wolfhound curled up in bed with him. He wondered how late it was. He felt terribly alert for the ungodly hour, and should probably not try to stay awake and ruin his sleep schedule, but decided at the very least to have a late night snack.
As quietly as he could, Remus slipped out of bed. The dog snorted in his sleep, but did not wake up. He yawned, stretched his paws, then flopped back into the bed with a gentle huff. Remus resisted the urge to scratch him behind the ears and instead went downstairs into the kitchen. As he pushed the door open, he thought for a moment he heard James’s voice.

“You shouldn’t have sent a letter — Hedwig was hurt. I think someone tried to intercept it. Someone might have seen it.”

And Regulus answered, “But you understood what it meant, yes?”

“‘Same time, same place,’ like when you floo’ed me during the Triwizard Tournament.”

Remus, utterly bewildered, looked around the door to see Regulus crouched at the fireplace, talking to Harry. Remus couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw the flickering faces of Hermione, Ron, and Neville in the fireplace as well.

Remus cleared his throat to make his presence known. Regulus whipped around and looked relieved to see it was only him.

“What is it?” Neville’s worried voice came through the fireplace. “Is someone listening in on us?”

“It’s just Lupin,” said Regulus. “I can’t imagine he’ll tell anyone about our conversation.”

Remus did not stick his head in the fire — his joints ached a bit too much for that — but he did take a seat beside Regulus and leaned back against the mantle. “Tell Harry hello from me. I’m sure James and Sirius would say hello, too, and Lily would tell you you’re being reckless and risking capture.”

There was the faintest flicker of a smile across Regulus’s face as he leaned back towards the fire. “Did you get all that?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Hi, Uncle Remus.”

There was a similar chorus of, “Hello, Mr. Lupin,” from Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

“How are things at Hogwarts?” Remus asked.

“It’s terrible,” Harry said, as if he’d been waiting to vent his frustrations of the last month to someone. “Umbridge isn’t teaching us anything! I’ve been in detention more nights than not because of how horrible she is and —”

Harry stopped abruptly, and there was a brief pause before Ron picked up the tirade.

“She’s banned Quidditch,” he said. “No groups are allowed to form without her consent. Of course she let Slytherin form right away, but she’s holding it over our heads for some reason. She’s making everything miserable for us.”

“I’d heard she’d banned societies and teams,” Regulus said, which told Remus just how much he’d overheard of the impromptu Order meeting with Mundungus. “Seems you’ll have to continue your secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group in secret.”

“Did Sirius tell you?” asked Neville. “He promised he wouldn’t —”

“He didn’t promise anything of the sort,” said Hermione.

“He did tell us,” Remus said, “but so did Mundungus. You were overheard at the Hog’s Head, you
know. You might want to pick places with more noise or find better hidden corners if you want to have those kinds of conversations.”

“We didn’t see Mundungus there,” said Ron.

“Because Mundungus knows how to disguise himself,” said Remus. “He had to, because the barman banned him from the Hog’s Head twenty years ago, and we lost Moody’s spare Invisibility Cloak when Sturgis was arrested.” Remus glanced at Regulus, wondering if he was sharing too much Order information. “But enough about Mundungus. Don’t let me interrupt whatever conversation you wanted to have that was so crucial you had to risk getting caught on the Floo Network to have it.”

“Yeah, what is it you wanted to talk about?” Harry asked Regulus. “Remus is right; this is really risky for you.”

“I only wanted to know if you were having second doubts about your Defense group,” Regulus said. “And, if you were, to encourage you to do it anyway.”

“That doesn’t seem like you,” Remus murmured, quiet enough that it would not carry into the floo, but just loud enough for Regulus to hear him.

“What did my parents say?” Neville asked.

“I believe your father and mother thought it was a thrilling idea,” Regulus said, “though I don’t believe they’ve been by since we heard about Umbridge’s ban.”

“Mrs. Weasley is quite against you joining, Ron,” said Remus.

“And my parents?” asked Harry.

“Concerned. They like the idea, but they don’t want you getting into trouble.”

“I’m going to do it,” Harry said defiantly.

“Are you?” asked Regulus. Remus thought he heard a smile in Regulus’s voice.

“Yes.”

“Why do you care so much about whether or not we fight back against Umbridge?” asked Hermione.

Remus appreciated the question. It was one he had wanted to ask Regulus. He wondered if they would get an honest answer from Regulus.

“Because I saw you fight the Dark Lord,” Regulus said. “Because I saw you stand up to him, and I know you’ll have to do it again. Your friends may have to face him, too, or his Death Eaters. If you allow this chance to practice together, to build allies and abilities, pass you by, you’ll be doing a great credit to the Dark Lord.”

Remus had a feeling they were not the words Harry wanted to hear, but it was certainly an honest answer.

“When you put it like that….” Ron started.

“You make it sound like by doing nothing we’re just as bad as his followers,” Hermione squeaked.
“Isn’t that the Ministry at this moment? Those who stand aside in the face of evil are as complicit
in the actions themselves, are they not?”

“But — what if we get expelled?” asked Neville.

“I have a feeling Dumbledore would never let that happen,” said Regulus.

Remus wondered where this small motivational speech was coming from. Was it purely because
Regulus had been there in the graveyard with Harry? Because he had seen first hand what Harry
needed to know to face Voldemort? Or perhaps Regulus was regretting his own decisions in the
first war and wanted to prevent others from making the same mistake. It was strange to see Regulus
so earnest about something, so determined. Remus was too used to Regulus being passive.

“Have you thought about where you’ll meet?” Remus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “No ideas, though.”

“Shrieking Shack is unoccupied these days,” Remus suggested, “unless your school is playing host
to a young werewolf I haven’t met yet.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t think so. There are thirty-three of us. It would be hard to get everyone
down there unnoticed, and the shack is so small….”

“Thirty-three? That’s impressive.”

“Cedric helped recruit some of them.” Harry sounded a little better. Remus wanted to ask if
everything was alright with Cedric. He’d been worried this summer. Cedric seemed to be taking
the events of the Triwizard Tournament at least as hard as Harry had been, but quieter to escape
notice. Remus did not think asking Harry over the floo was the best way to have that question
answered, though.

“There’s a passage on the fourth floor behind a giant mirror,” Remus tried again. “Could be big
enough.”

“Blocked,” Harry said. “Or caved in or something.”

Remus was out of ideas. “The Chamber of Secrets, perhaps? I think the basilisk corpse might
provide a good atmosphere for a Defense class.”

“The what?” Regulus asked, astonishment plain on his face.

Harry laughed. “I think the giant slide would make it hard to get out of, unless Fawkes wants to be
a ferry service for us.”

“You’ll think of something, I’m —”

Remus stopped abruptly as Regulus pulled himself away from the fireplace without warning. He
cought sight of a plump hand, stubby fingers decorated in heavy gold and jewels, groping through
the fire before the Floo Network closed and the fire returned to its usual dull orange color.

Regulus looked a little paler than usual. “That was… fairly close. I suppose Lily was right; they
are watching the Floo Network. I’d just hope a connection to Hogwarts would be safer.”

“Lily is usually right. I expect with Umbridge at the school, though, she’s watching the Network
more closely than ever. She has an impressive taste in jewelry, doesn’t she?”
“I believe the last time you told me about Umbridge, I said Mother would have loved her. I take that back.”

Remus laughed. He hadn’t really thought much of Regulus’s sense of humor, but perhaps it was just harder to notice when it was covered in barbs meant for Sirius.

“Was encouraging them to start their little Defense group really worth the risk?”

“Yes.” Regulus stood and brushed soot off of his robes. “Harry needs to learn to fight. He should not have to go through the graveyard again. He has all the bravery he needs, but he’s lacking in practice.”

Remus wondered if Regulus had somehow overheard the prophecy. It would explain why Regulus was so set on Harry being able to fight. But Remus could not think when Regulus would have learned of it. Remus was not sure anyone had spoken it aloud since he had been told over a late night tea with James and Lily shortly after Harry’s third birthday.

“I don’t disagree with you,” Remus said. He looked up at the clock hanging above the mantle. “I suppose you’re awake because you napped all afternoon?”

“Isn’t that why you’re awake?”

“Just wanted a snack.” Remus stood and stretched. “Hungry?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be going to bed.”

Remus thought Regulus still looked spooked by his near escape from Umbridge’s stubby grasp. He remembered Sirius saying Regulus had risked capture last month in Knockturn Alley at Dumbledore’s request. Had he been terrified then, too? It seemed odd to think that Regulus, who had so willingly faced Voldemort alone just a few months earlier would be spooked by the thought of a return trip to Azkaban.

“Well, good night, then,” said Remus.

“Good night,” said Regulus, and he headed upstairs, leaving Remus to wonder what hidden motives Regulus had in the middle of this war.

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the sweets this year. They were delightful. I’ve never had a better first month at Hogwarts. Professor Umbridge is our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and her classes are dull, it’s true, but she’s very straightforward about the work, and doesn’t stand for any of the riffraff the Headmaster lets into this school. She’s really getting Hogwarts on the right track.

Most recently, she issued Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four. She banned all clubs and activities without her explicit permission. Of course, she gave permission for the Slytherin Quidditch team to reform right away. I didn’t have any trouble, just asked her if it was alright and she agreed. Apparently some Quidditch teams need more consideration. She’s worried about their temperaments, and of course she’s right. Some Quidditch teams at Hogwarts have no sense of decorum.

Professor Umbridge has been observing teachers, too, to make sure they’re up to Ministry standards. She seems very concerned with the important things of their job. I’m sure by the end of
the month, she’ll have gotten rid of at least one of the teachers, and will replace them with someone much more qualified. This school can really use her improvements.

Thank you again for your gift this year. I’m sending along a package of something I picked up for you in Hogsmeade.

Love,

Draco Malfoy

—— —— ——

Dear Mr. Lupin,

Defense Against the Dark Arts is terribly boring. Do you have any recommendations for a fifth-year level spell book? It’d be nice to learn something this year.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy
**Dumbledore's Army**

Chapter Summary

Harry and his friends find a place to practice.

Chapter Notes

What a week! I've got so much work to do. So much for summer break! So apologies on this nearly-late chapter. It still hasn't passed midnight here, so I'm not technically late.

Shout out to my beta, ageofzero, for once again, delivering notes on such short notice. A true friend. I'd be fish food without them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The classroom was full of croaking bullfrogs and cawing ravens, which made for easy conversation without risk of being overheard. They were supposed to be practicing Silencing Charms, but Harry wasn't doing very well. In his defense, he was a little distracted.

“You think Umbridge attacked Hedwig?” he asked Hermione.

Yesterday, his History of Magic class had been interrupted by a wounded Hedwig delivering a single scrap of parchment that said, “Same time, same place.” Harry had been worried about what happened to her, but he hadn’t expected Hermione to suggest a teacher was responsible for her injury. Though he supposed if it was a person who was responsible, he wouldn’t be surprised to know it was Umbridge.

“I’m almost certain of it,” Hermione said. “I’ve been suspecting this ever since Filch accused you of ordering Dungbombs, because it seemed like such a stupid lie. I mean, once your letter had been read, it would have been quite clear you weren’t ordering them, so you wouldn’t have been in trouble at all — it’s a bit of a feeble joke, isn’t it? But then I thought, what if somebody just wanted an excuse to read your mail? Well then, it would be a perfect way for Umbridge to manage it — tip off Filch, let him do the dirty work and confiscate the letter, then either find a way of stealing it from him or else demand to see it. I don’t think Filch would object, when’s he ever stuck up for a student’s rights? Harry, you’re squishing your frog.”

Harry looked down and saw the frog’s eyes nearly bulging. He hadn’t realized. Umbridge made him so furious. There had to be some way to get rid of her, but it felt like every time he breathed, she dug her stubby fingers in deeper and deeper. He sighed, frustrated with the Charms assignment, with Umbridge, and with his own uselessness.

“It was a very, very close call last night,” said Hermione. “I just wonder if Umbridge knows how close it was. *Silencio.*” Hermione’s bullfrog went silent mid-croak. “If she’d caught Llewelyn….”

“He’d be back in Azkaban this morning,” Harry finished. He waved his wand and said the spell,
but his mind was really on Hedwig and Regulus, hoping they were both okay. Hedwig, at least, was in Professor Grubbly-Plank’s tender care. Regulus Black he could not be sure of. As a result of his incomplete attention, his bullfrog, instead of going quiet, began to whistle like a ready tea kettle.

“Silencio!” said Hermione. Harry’s frog immediately went quiet.

“He mustn’t do it again,” she said, and for a moment Harry thought she meant the frog. “I just don’t know how we can let him know. We can’t send him an owl.”

“I don’t reckon he’ll risk it again,” said Ron. “He’s not stupid; he knows she nearly got him.”

Harry hoped Ron was right. Regulus might be someone with hidden motives and a lot of secrets, but Regulus did not deserve Azkaban. Harry was fairly certain that if Regulus had not been there to help him escape Voldemort in the graveyard last summer, he and Cedric would have died.

On top of Harry’s distractions — or more likely because of them — he made little progress in the way of mastering the Silencing Charm and was assigned extra practice as homework, along with Ron. It didn’t help that it was raining heavily and they were forced to stay inside for their break.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione found an open space beside a window in an otherwise crowded classroom, though the space was only available because the glass offered no insulation from the cold weather. Harry pulled his cloak tighter as they sat down. He stared out the window and watched the rain. He imagined Umbridge staring out her window, waiting for Hedwig to swoop past on a delivery, and aiming her wand. It made him horribly angry and he wanted to do something. The nearest thing would be this Defense class, but they were stuck without a place to practice, and now they had to worry about getting caught by Umbridge. It made him more determined than ever to make this group come together.

Harry ducked under an ink pellet, thrown from the chandelier by Peeves, and noticed Hermione staring thoughtfully out the window.

Ron saw it too, and asked, “What’s up with you, Hermione? You’re not the one with extra Charms homework.”

She frowned slightly. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Just… wondering. I suppose… we’re doing the right thing, I think… aren’t we?”

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked to Ron for help, but Ron did not seem to have any better understanding.

“Well, that clears that up,” said Ron. “It would’ve been really annoying if you hadn’t explained yourself properly.”

Hermione shook her head, more like she was clearing her thoughts than frustrated with Ron. “I was just wondering,” she began again, in a much more present voice, “whether we’re doing the right thing, starting this Defense Against the Dark Arts group.”

Harry stared at her, surprised she could be thinking that when he had just come to the exact opposite conclusion. “But it was you’re idea.”

“I know, but… after talking to Reg — er, Llewelyn —”
“He’s all for it.”

“Yes, that’s what worries me. How much can we trust him?”

“We’ve done this before,” said Ron. “Every year we wonder how much we can trust him and he always proves himself in the end.”

“The Order doesn’t trust him,” said Hermione.

“My mum trusts him,” said Harry. “He saved my life, and he tried to kill Voldemort.”

Hermione frowned. “I suppose.”

“It’s not like he could tell Umbridge about us without getting arrested,” Ron added. “I don’t know how he could be encouraging us for any secret reason. And Lupin thinks it’s a good idea, too.”

“Yes, that’s true, but I —”

She stopped abruptly as Angelina Johnson squeezed her way through the classroom towards them.

“There you guys are,” she said, “I got permission! To reform the Quidditch team.”

“Excellent!” said Ron.

“Yeah, I went to McGonagall and I think she might have appealed to Dumbledore — anyway, Umbridge had to give in. So I want you down on the pitch at seven o’clock tonight, alright? Because we’ve got to make up time. You realize our first match is in three weeks.”

As Angelina left, Ron’s excitement flagged. He stared out the window at the thick sheets of rain. “Hope the weather clears,” he muttered as Angelina moved off.

Harry wasn’t particularly hopeful about the weather, but he was glad to hear McGonagall had gotten the Quidditch team reformed. At least she’d been able to do something about Umbridge, even if she did have to appeal to Dumbledore.

He wondered if McGonagall had gone to Dumbledore about Umbridge’s detentions. Surely Dumbledore could have done something about them. Did that mean Dumbledore did not have the power to really stop Umbridge or was he choosing not to?

Harry’s head throbbed and he leaned against the cold glass pane. This year was not going well. At least he still had Quidditch, even if it was pouring outside.

“Harry! Hermione! Ron!”

They all turned to see Neville squeezing between two desks. His cheeks were pink and he looked winded. When he reached them, he paused to catch his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked, growing impatient with his panting.

“I found it,” he said, finally managing to fill his lungs enough for words.

Ron stared at him. “What did you lose?”

“Nothing — well, I lost one of my hats, a pair of gloves, some quills, three socks, and… something else, but I can’t remember…. But it’s not that!” Neville motioned for them to lean closer and lowered his voice. “I found a place to practice.”
It took Harry another moment to realize what Neville was talking about. His mind was still on Quidditch. “Oh! Where is it?”

“I was up on the seventh floor thinking about it and I just found it! Come on, let me show you.”

Harry exchanged skeptical looks with Ron and Hermione, but Neville looked so eager, and he was already leading them out of the classroom, so they decided they may as well follow.

It was a fairly long walk up to the seventh floor, and Neville took them down a side corridor until they reached the tapestry of trolls in tutus. Harry eyed the tapestry, wondering if it was hiding some secret room he hadn’t discovered yet, but then he saw Neville was looking at the stone wall opposite it.

“It was right here,” said Neville.

“What was?” asked Hermione, turning away from the tapestry.

“There was this really cool room, with all these Defense books in it.” Neville pushed his hand against the wall like it might give beneath him, but it remained solid stone. “I swear, there was a door here.”

“We’ve been up here a lot on the way to Divination,” said Ron, “and I’ve never seen a door.”

“It was here,” Neville said again, “I know it was.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t know Neville. Maybe it was a different corridor.”

“Maybe,” said Neville, though he continued staring at the wall like a door might materialize from the stone if he stared long enough.

Ron looked at his watch. “If we’re late for Transfiguration, McGonagall will dock points. We’d better hurry.”

Harry started back down the corridor and realized Neville was not following. Neville was still staring dejectedly at the wall.

“We’ll find something,” he said to Neville, “We’re going to fight back.”

“Yeah,” Neville said, voice a little stronger, perhaps not cheered, but determined. “Maybe it’ll turn up somewhere else.”

“Rooms in this castle don’t move, just the stairs” Hermione called back from the end of the corridor. “Hurry up.”

Harry adjusted his bag on his shoulder and hurried downstairs after her.

—— —— ——

It was hours later when Harry and Ron went into the locker rooms, utterly drenched from a dismal Quidditch practice. It wasn’t even that they played poorly — though Harry was pretty sure Ron could have played better — it was that the rain made it impossible to see much of anything, even if they used Impervius to keep the rain off of their faces. Harry practiced his maneuvers until he was soaked to the bone, which was all fine for a Seeker. He didn’t know how anyone else who was working in coordination was able to handle it. He knew Ron fumbled several easy saves, though Harry hoped that was just the rain, but everyone else was little more than a red blur in the distance.
Fred and George played poorly, too, but rather than the weather, they blamed their Fever Fudge induced boils, exacerbated by their brooms.

Angelina tried to explain it was possible the match against Slytherin could be in equally poor weather conditions, so practice still mattered, but it did not make the exercise any more bearable. Everyone was grateful when she gave up the attempt.

Back in the locker room, Harry wrung out his Quidditch practice robes. They made a nice-sized puddle on the floor.

“Watch it,” said Ron, as the puddle moved into his trainers.

Harry mumbled an apology and rubbed a towel through his hair. As he did, pain shot through his scar. Harry let out a sudden yell and stumbled back into his locker. The metal clattered loudly as the door slammed shut. He pressed his face into the towel, wanting both to hide the severity of what had just happened and hoping the pressure would make the pain fade. The sharpness of it was gone, but his scar continued to throb, like it did when he woke up from a particularly vivid nightmare.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Katie Bell asked.

“I’m fine,” he said through the towel.

“You sure?” asked Fred, or maybe it was George.

“Yeah I just — poked my eye.”

Harry was not sure if they bought his excuse, but he pulled the towel away from his face and looked at Ron, hoping to communicate some of the truth with a look.

When they were all redressed in warm and dry robes, they stood at the door of the locker room, staring into the rain. It showed no signs of slowing. Angelina took a deep breath and pulled her robes up over her head, hoping to keep the worst of the rain off her. Fred and George followed without even attempting to stay dry — judging by their awkward waddle, they had more painful concerns on their mind. Katie started to pull her hood up, but Alicia said, “Wait, I’ve been practicing something,” and pointed her wand in the air. It created a fountain-like shield, resembling a Muggle umbrella. She and Katie linked arms and headed up to the castle, remaining mostly dry on the way.

Ron and Harry lingered another moment.

“Was it your scar?” Ron asked, once he was certain Alicia and Katie were too far to hear them through the pounding rain.

Harry nodded.

Ron looked out in the rain, squinting. “But — he can’t be near us now, can he?”

Harry shook his head. He did not know why his scar hurt so much more, though his dad had said it would be more frequent with Voldemort returned. “It hurt because he’s angry.”

Harry was not sure how he knew that was the truth, he was not even sure why he said it at all, but he was positive he was right.

“Did you see him?” Ron asked. His face looked pale. “Was it… a vision or something?”
Harry once remembered trying to ask Remus if his nightmares two summers ago were visions, and Remus had brushed them off with a joke about Harry’s poor results in Divination.

“No,” Harry said. “He…” Harry sank down onto a bench and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, like it might alleviate the pressure in his head. “He wants something done, and it’s not happening fast enough.”

“But… how do you know?” asked Ron.

Harry did not know how to answer Ron. He did not know why he knew what he knew, but he was as sure of it as he was of his hatred for Umbridge.

“Is this what happened in the common room after Quidditch tryouts?”

Harry was honestly surprised Ron remembered that time. Ron had been swept up in the success of being named Gryffindor’s Keeper, yet he had remembered that Harry’s scar had flared with pain.

“Yes, but… that time he was happy.” Harry did not know where these words were coming from. He knew he was only saying them because it was Ron here. Had he been talking to anyone else, maybe even to Hermione or Neville or his parents, he was not sure he would be able to complete these thoughts out loud. “He was pleased, really pleased.”

“You could take over from Trelawney, mate,” Ron said in a low voice.

Harry shook his head, again remembering Remus’s wry comment. “I’m not making any prophecies.”

“No, you know what you’re doing? Harry, you’re reading You-Know-Who’s mind.”

Harry shook his head harder. “No. No, I mean… It’s more like his mood. Dumbledore said something like this was happening last year, when I was having weird dreams, and it hurt when he was close or angry or murderous. My parents said it would be stronger now that he’s back.”

“You’ve got to tell someone,” said Ron.

“How?” Harry asked. “We can’t write letters back, not with Umbridge watching the mail like that.”

“Tell Dumbledore.”

“What’s Dumbledore going to do? He already knows because we talked last year.”

“But this is different. Maybe it’ll help the Order.”

“I don’t see how. Dumbledore’s got enough he’s dealing with.”

“Tell McGonagall, then, Harry. If she thinks it’s important enough for the Order to know about it, she’ll make sure they do.”

Harry let out a long sigh and ran a hand through his still damp hair. “Fine. I’ll tell McGonagall on Thursday after class. Happy?”

“Yeah. Do you know how to do that trick Alicia did with her wand?”

Harry shook his head. He and Ron headed back up to the castle, slipping through the mud, doing their best to keep their cloaks over their heads. It was hard to talk over the pounding rain, and Harry was left to his thoughts. He wondered what Voldemort was so angry about. He recalled what the
Order had said back in August about Voldemort and his plans. He was searching for something…. Did this anger mean he’d been thwarted in getting it?

Harry wished he could ask his parents about it. He also wished that if he could ask them, they’d give him a straight answer.

Once back in the common room, Harry and Ron set to work on their mountain of homework. Harry was supposed to be writing a paper on Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts for Snape, but he struggled to stay focused. He kept thinking back to his scar hurting, and what it would mean for the Order. Surely this insight to Voldemort couldn’t give him more information than the Order already had, could it?

He remembered Regulus Black asking about his nightmares over the summer. Had Regulus expected something like this might happen? Did Regulus think Harry was having visions of what Voldemort was doing, like he did last year? Harry’s dreams had been a mixture of horrible and odd this year, but nothing like what had happened last year. No dreams of murdering Muggles or cursing Death Eaters, just these painful moments and flashes of emotion. But if Regulus suspected Harry might have some sort of clue into Voldemort’s mind, why hadn’t he told the Order?

Ron groaned loudly and threw down his quill. “I’m going to bed.”

Harry looked at Ron’s three paragraphs and back at his own three sentences. “I’m gonna try to finish this.”

“If you insist. You sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.”

Ron waited a moment, like he was expecting Harry to change his mind. He did not. Ron went up to bed with an exhausted, “Good night.” Harry pulled his Potions textbook closer and tried, once more, to read through it for his essay.

But it was late, and he was exhausted — physically and emotionally, from a dismal week, a dismal Quidditch practice, and this business with his scar.

Without making any headway on his assignment, Harry fell asleep, book in his lap, head lolling back against the chair, mouth half-open.

The corridor that had cropped up lately in his dreams reappeared. There were no windows, only smooth black stones marking the walls on either side of him. The door at the end seemed to grow in size as he approached it, like its size was directly related to the thrill in his chest. With each step forward his heart beat with new excitement. He needed to be beyond that door, he needed to open it.

Harry raised a hand, reaching for the handle, and someone said, “Harry Potter, sir!”

Harry woke suddenly, still in the chair beside the fire. It took him a moment to orient himself, to take in the house-elf standing in front of the fire with Hedwig nestled on his head.

“Dobby?”

“It is Dobby, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby volunteered to return Harry Potter’s owl! Professor Grubbly-Plank says she is all well now!” Dobby bowed, and as his head tipped forward, Hedwig gave an indignant hoot and fluttered onto Harry’s knee.
Harry stroked her chest with a finger. “Thanks, Dobby.” His head was still stuck in the dream. It had been so realistic he was still struggling to pull himself back into the Gryffindor common room. He tried and failed to stifle a yawn.

“Dobby does not mind, sir, for Dobby is always hoping to meet Harry Potter, and tonight, Dobby has gotten his wish!” Dobby smiled broadly, then it faded and a shyness crept over Dobby’s features. “Is everything alright with Harry Potter?” Dobby asked. “Dobby heard him muttering in his sleep. Was Harry Potter having bad dreams?”

“No really.” Harry stretched his arms over his head. The corridor, strange as it was, paled in comparison to his dreams of the graveyard.

“Dobby wishes he could help Harry Potter, for Harry Potter set Dobby free and Dobby is much, much happier now.”

Harry gently moved Hedwig from his knee to his shoulder and stood. “Thanks, Dobby, but I don’t think there’s anything you can do.” He rolled up his barely begun Potions essay, wishing Dobby could write it for him, and a bit amused by the disaster that would be. The white scars on the back of his hand from Umbridge’s detentions glinted in the dim firelight as he gathered up his belongings. “Actually, Dobby…. Do you know somewhere thirty-three people can practice Defense Against the Dark Arts without being discovered by any of the teachers? Especially Umbridge?”

Unexpectedly, Dobby’s face lit up. “Dobby knows the perfect place, sir! Hogwarts house-elves know of it well; it is sometimes called the Come and Go Room, or else as the Room of Requirement.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a room that a person can only enter when they have a real need of it. Sometimes it is there, sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker’s needs.”

Harry remembered Neville’s story that morning about finding a room for practice. “Dobby… is the room always in the same place? On the seventh floor by the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy?”

“Harry Potter knows of it!” Dobby clapped his hands together. “Yes, the Room of Requirement is always there, but it will only appear when it is called into service.”

“Do a lot of people know about it?” Harry thought that perhaps Hermione should have known about something like this, but she had said nothing earlier, and nothing when Neville had tried to tell them about it.

“Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again.”

So Neville had found it accidentally. And if even Hermione hadn’t heard of it before, it was unlikely Umbridge knew of it. It was perfect, then.

“Dobby, can you tell me how to get into it?”

“Of course! Dobby can take Harry Potter right now if he likes.”

Harry looked down at his watch. It was well-past midnight, he still had Snape’s essay to finish, and his brief nap had not rejuvenated him much at all.
“Thanks, Dobby, but not tonight. Just… tell me exactly where it is and how to get in it.”

The weather was so atrocious the next day that Angelina found them to tell them Quidditch practice would be canceled. Flying in hail the size of gobstones was impossible.

Harry told her that if no one could practice Quidditch, it would be a perfect night to practice Defense Against the Dark Arts. She raised her eyebrows at him in surprise, but agreed to spread the word.

Just before eight, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville went to the seventh floor. Neville looked up at the solid wall with determination on his face, like he would not let the hidden room fool him this time.

“Hold on,” Harry said, when Neville started walking. He pulled the Marauder’s Map from his bag and whispered, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” He searched the map for the locations of Umbridge and Filch. Umbridge was tucked away in her office, probably ruminating on how good she was at making life terrible for students. It made Harry all the more thrilled about what they were doing. Filch and Mrs. Norris were both on the second floor.

“Okay, it’s clear,” Harry said. “Dobby said to walk past the wall three times, concentrating hard on what we need.”

Hermione looked a little skeptical, but Ron seemed fairly sure of what they were about to do. The four of them paced between the window and a large vase, back and forth, each thinking heavily on the sort of room they would need. Somewhere they could learn to fight, somewhere with space, somewhere with information, somewhere they would not be found.

“Harry,” Hermione said, and he opened his eyes after their third turn. In the wall appeared a large, polished door. She looked surprised to see it, and Ron looked wary.

Only Neville looked certain as he took the handle and pushed the door open.

The room inside was spacious, like a classroom cleared of desks. There were some cushions for sitting, and the wall was lined with bookshelves, all filled with so many books that Harry was reminded of his parents’ study. There were also several Dark Detectors, such as the Foe-Glass hanging from the wall and a collection of Sneakoscopes on one shelf.

Hermione gaped at the books, running her fingers along a set of spines. “A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions… The Dark Arts Outsmarted… Self-Defensive Spellwork… Wow. This is incredible, like every Defense book that’s ever been used in this school.”

Harry figured that was probably what it was. Any textbook a Defense teacher may have left behind could have ended up in this room. Hermione selected one of the books and sank into one of the cushions to read.

Ginny, Lavender, Parvati, and Dean arrived a few moments later, gaping at the room and its size. Harry explained to them what it was and that Neville had found it first. When he finished, Padma Patil, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, and Anthony Goldstein had arrived and he had to start over.

At exactly eight o’clock, the last troop had arrived — Dennis Creevey, Colin Creevey, and their two Slytherin friends. Harry explained what the room was for the last time, and turned the key in the door lock. He wondered if, once it was locked, the door was visible to anyone outside who
“Well,” he said, looking around at the group of students collected on the cushions and against the bookshelves. “This is the place we’ve found for practices, and you’ve — er — obviously found it okay —”

“It’s fantastic,” Cho said, and a handful of students agreed — the Creevey brothers most enthusiastically.

“We once hid from Filch in here,” Fred said with a grin. “Remember, George? It was just a broom cupboard then.”

“Yeah, Neville’s the one who told us where it was,” Harry said. He cleared his throat not really sure how to begin. “So, I’ve been thinking about the sort of stuff we ought to do first, and, er — What is it, Hermione?”

She had raised her hand, and it made Harry feel uncomfortable, like a teacher in the front of the classroom. These were not his students, they were his peers. Some of them were even older than him, and surely had more experience in these spells, like Cedric or Angelina, or Fred and George.

“I think we ought to elect a leader,” Hermione said.

“Harry’s leader,” Cho said quickly. Again, the Creevey brothers enthusiastically agreed.

Harry’s stomach turned over once.

“Yes, but I think we ought to vote on it properly,” Hermione continued. “It makes it formal and it gives him authority.”

“It’s a good idea,” Cedric said, the first thing he’d said since he had arrived with Pearl and Amber Lais.

“So,” Hermione said, “everyone who thinks Harry ought to be our leader?”

Thirty-two hands went into the air at varying speeds. Some, like Cho, Hermione, Dennis, and Colin were eager; some were in agreement, but simply bored with the proceedings, such as Fred and George and Ginny; some were reluctant, like Marietta Edgecombe and Zacharias Smith. But all hands were in the air. Harry hoped his face wasn’t as red as it felt.

“Right, thanks,” he said, “so I was saying — What, Hermione?” Harry was never going to even remember what he wanted to say if Hermione kept interrupting him.

Hermione lowered her hand. “I also think we ought to have a name. It would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don’t you think?”

“Anti-Umbridge League,” Angelina suggested, with enough bitterness for Harry to relate.

“Ministry of Magic are Morons Meeting,” Fred suggested, and Ginny high-fived him for it from her seat beside Michael Corner.

“I was thinking,” Hermione frowned, “more of a name that didn’t tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings.”

“The Defense Association?” said Cho. “We can use D.A. for short, so nobody knows what we’re talking about?”
“Yeah, that’s good,” said Ginny, “only can it be for Dumbledore’s Army? Since that’s the Ministry’s worst fear.”

Ernie Macmillan and Cho laughed, though it seemed to be with Ginny’s suggestion and not at it. There was a general murmur of support for the new name.

“All in favor of the D.A.?” Hermione asked.

There were a few who abstained from voting, whether out of apathy or distaste, including Luna and Marietta.

Hermione counted up the votes, twenty-six in total, and, once she declared, “motion passed,” like it was some sort of formal meeting, she wrote, “Dumbledore’s Army,” at the top of the list they had signed back in the Hog’s Head, and pinned it to a bookshelf.

“Right,” Harry said, now growing anxious about beginning. “Shall we get practicing then? I was thinking, the first thing we should do is Expelliarmus, you know, the Disarming Charm. I know it’s pretty basic, but I’ve found it really useful —”

“Oh, please,” Zacharias Smith rolled his eyes, “I don’t think Expelliarmus is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who do you?”

Harry, emboldened by his annoyance at being interrupted a third time, said, “I’ve used it against him. It saved my life last June.”

A hush fell over the room and Harry realized it was the closest to talking about his duel with Voldemort that he’d gotten since he had told his father and Dumbledore what had happened in the graveyard.

“If you think it’s beneath you, you can leave.”

No one moved.

“Okay,” he said, “I reckon we should all divide into pairs and practice.”

Pairs happened easily enough. Most students had arrived in groups of twos and threes, except Luna, who had wandered in behind Cho and Marietta. But Luna ended up paired with Neville, and they were well-suited in terms of skill. Luna’s Disarming Charms sometimes worked, but sometimes all she did was blow Neville’s hair back. Neville was about as successful at Disarming Luna, though that might have more to do with Luna’s complete lack of attention to defending herself than anything else.

Harry walked around the room, correcting where he could, and he was surprised by how poorly many of the students were doing, even the sixth and seventh years. Amber Lais was the same year as Cedric, and was consistently Disarmed by her younger sister. Cedric, though, was paired with Susan Bones, and both were doing very well. Harry paused only to congratulate Susan and suggest she concentrate on resisting Cedric’s spell, since the two of them were already competent at delivering it. Angelina was paired with Fred, and George with Lee Jordan. Fred and George seemed to be doing terribly at Disarming their own partners. Then Harry noticed Zacharias Smith’s wand flying out of his hand each time he opened his mouth, instead of when Justin cast the spell.

When Fred saw Harry watching him, he gave a lopsided grin. “Sorry, Harry. Couldn’t resist.”

Harry only shook his head and motioned for Fred and George to go back to Disarming Angelina and Lee Jordan.
The Creevey brothers were very enthusiastic in their spell-casting, as they were with everything, but Colin consistently Disarmed Dennis, and Dennis was rarely so successful. Harry noticed the two Slytherins were having a similar mis-match of talent.

He paused by the two little Slytherins. “Er — it’s Atalanta and Hugh, right?”

They paused and looked up at him with adoring expressions that made him supremely uncomfortable. Atalanta nodded.

“Atalanta, can you trade with Dennis? You’re very good, I want you and Colin to practice resisting the spell, since you cast it well. Is that okay? And Hugh, you can practice with Dennis.”

Atalanta grinned, stuck a teasing tongue out at Hugh, and traded places with Dennis. While Atalanta and Colin went back to practicing, Harry took a moment to review the spell with Hugh and Dennis, showing them how to keep the wand movement short, brief, and accurate.

“See Cedric and Hermione?” Harry pointed to the other side of the classroom. “Watch them — see how Cedric barely moved his arm? It’s all in his wrist. Look how quick Hermione moves her wand. But see, when Ron casts it, and he keeps his elbow out? It’s easier to be Disarmed that way.”

Harry was not sure if any of what he said to Hugh and Dennis sank in, but their performance improved marginally, and Harry went onto check on the others.

Ernie was flourishing too much, and Harry offered only a mild correction. He tried to help Luna and Neville, but their struggle seemed to lie in concentration and determination, and Harry did not know how to help them with that.

He’d gone around to everyone else twice, and figured he probably could not ignore Cho and her friend much longer. He started towards them, and as he did, Cho’s spell went a bit wild. She stumbled over her incantation and Marietta’s sleeve caught fire instead of her wand flying from her hand.

“Oh,” Cho said, “I’m sorry —” She turned to Harry. “You made me nervous. I was doing alright before then.”

“It was quite good,” Harry said, and realized how stupid that sounded when she had failed so obviously. “Well, no, it was lousy, but I know you can do it properly. I was watching from over there.”

Marietta had extinguished her robe and was glaring at Harry like the whole situation was his fault, instead of her friend who had set her sleeve on fire. She stormed away to the Foe Glass and leaned against it, clearly done practicing.

“Don’t mind her,” said Cho. “She doesn’t want to be here, but I made her come with, so I wouldn’t have to be here by myself.” Her eyes darted towards Cedric and Susan, and Harry’s stomach tried to claw its way out his throat.

“Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge. Her mum works for the Ministry.”

“So does Ron’s dad,” Harry said. “He and his brothers and Ginny are still here.”

Cho looked a little surprised by his statement, and Harry felt surprised, too. He had not meant for it to sound like he was trying to fight her, but he had been thrown off-guard by her glance at Cedric. He did his best for a quick recovery.
“Er — are your parents okay with you being here?”

“They’ve forbidden me from getting on the wrong side of Umbridge,” she said, “but we have to fight. If they think I’m going to stand back after what happened to you and Cedric —”

She broke off, and Harry wished she had broken off two words earlier.

“My father is very supportive of any anti-Ministry action,” said Luna Lovegood. She had just successfully disarmed Neville, and Harry wondered how long she’d been eavesdropping. “He’s always saying he’d believe anything of Fudge, I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible poisons, which he feeds secretly to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there’s his Umgubular Slashkilter —”

Cho shook her head, clearly used to Luna’s wild stories. Harry supposed the Ravenclaw common room must be a fascinating place to be.

“Hey, Harry,” Hermione had to shout over the noise of spells being cast and attempted, “have you checked the time?”

Harry looked down at his watch and was surprised to see it was already past nine. They were all in trouble for being out after-hours. Harry searched the bookshelves for a whistle and found one just within reach. He grabbed it and blew.

The piercing shriek stopped the group’s spells almost immediately.

“That was pretty good, guys,” Harry said, once he had everyone’s attention. “but we’ve overrun, we’d better leave it here. Same time, same place, next week?”

“Quidditch season,” Angelina protested.

“Okay,” Harry said, “not permanent, but just next week. We’ll figure something else out for later meetings then.”

Harry pulled the Marauder’s Map from his pocket and checked to see Umbridge was still in her office and Filch was not nearby. Once he was certain the coast was clear, he sent them off in groups of threes and fours. He watched each set of students walk to their common room as labeled dots on his map. The Hufflepuffs heading down towards the kitchens, the Ravenclaws up to their tower, the Gryffindors to the Fat Lady’s portrait, and the two little Slytherins to their common room in the dungeons beneath the Black Lake.

Finally, it was just him, Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

“It was really, really, good, Harry,” Hermione said as they left the Room of Requirement.

“Yeah, it was!” said Ron. The four of them turned to watch the door turn to stone, the room no longer needed. “Did you see me disarm Hermione, Harry?”

“Only once,” Hermione said. “I got you loads more than you got me.”

“I did not only get you once. I got you at least three times.”

“Well, if you’re counting the one where you tripped over your own feet and knocked the wand out of my hand.”
Harry fell into step beside Neville and let Ron and Hermione argue. It was not as grating as their bickering had been at the beginning of the year. Besides, his mind was on Cho and his eyes were on the Marauder’s Map, watching her dot move about her common room. She had said he made her nervous….

And then she had brought up Cedric. Harry had no experience dating, but wasn’t there a rule about not bringing your ex-boyfriend up to people you were interested in? When she said Cedric’s name, Harry felt like she was still in love with Cedric. But when Cho looked at him, Harry thought maybe she did like him best. He didn’t understand, and he didn’t want to be bitter with Cho or Cedric about it, but as he, Ron, and Neville got back to their dormitory and got ready for bed, Harry couldn’t help feeling just a little frustrated with the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
The Lion and the Serpent

Chapter Summary

Harry's first Quidditch match of the year.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!

This chapter was done earlier; I got it in on my usual Tuesday deadline for beta-ing, but the final edits today got interrupted too often by work responsibilities. That darn capitalism.

I will say, though, this is probably my favorite chapter of Order of the Phoenix that I've written so far. It has married banter, married drama, character growth, character conflict, and some really thought-provoking questions. Not to hype it up, but, truly, I love this chapter. Length falls about average at 18 pages, and it's not particularly fast-paced or action-packed, and nothing new or thrilling happens, but... I just... I really like it. And I hope you do too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lily closed the door behind her as quietly as she could. It was late — she glanced at the grandfather clock as she passed it and corrected herself. It was not late, it was very early. With a yawn, Lily trudged down to the kitchen and pulled the Order reports from the cabinet. The only sound in the house was the dim high-pitched squeaks coming from Kreacher’s cubby that were his snores.

Lily couldn’t say she disliked Kreacher, but it was hard for her to like him. He was rude, to begin with, and, to end with, he was a reminder of a long struggle she’d faced as a student and had thought she’d overcome. Being at Hogwarts in the middle of a war hadn’t been easy for her, a Muggle-born, and she’d endured far more than her fair share of insults and broken friendships.

There had been good friends, of course, and good moments, but Hogwarts was not where her best memories were. Lily’s happiest years were the years after the war, when she had been certain her family was safe. She wanted to believe there were happier years on the other side of this war, too, but it was harder to hope than it had been last time. She felt like this time she had more to lose.

Lily yawned again and sealed up her report. There was nothing urgent in it, which always seemed to be the case these days. James and Hestia had gotten their hands on a record of financial transactions for the Malfoy and Crabbe families, and she’d spent her night investigating what she could about them. She’d learned nothing they didn’t already know.

Most days Order work felt like this: a waste of time. Every time she felt like they had a lead, it went cold within days. They didn’t even know where Voldemort was hiding. She thought if they could just find that, perhaps they could come up with a better plan to bring him out into the open.
She didn’t like this sitting around, waiting for Voldemort to show up at the Ministry. It was never going to happen; he was too smart for that.

Lily had to admit, though, this work was better than the battles she’d fought in the first war. Then, she’d been young and ready to take on the world. And, if she’d died, well, there would be sadness and mourning but life would go on without her. Now? She couldn’t imagine what would happen to Harry and James without her, or her and Harry without James. This time she was far more terrified of not only losing her loved ones, but of who would take care of her family.

She checked the clock over the fireplace mantle and groaned. It was nearly sunrise. There was no sense in going to bed. Everyone else would be awake soon, and she and James would be leaving in a couple hours. So she began fixing a pot of coffee.

Regulus was awake first, as usual. The moment he was up, so was Kreacher, preparing a proper breakfast, serving of one, until Regulus asked Kreacher to cook for five. Kreacher was compliant when Regulus was the one doing the asking. It was Sirius who made him unruly.

“We aren’t expecting anyone for breakfast, are we?” Regulus asked as he sat down across from Lily.

“I don’t think so.” She stifled another yawn. “No one else was on duty last night, far as I know. Well, Gideon was, but I expect he’ll go straight into work.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

She gave him a wry smile. “Is it obvious?”

“You should rest.”

“Can’t. James and I are going to Harry’s Quidditch match. It’s his first one in over a year. I can’t miss that.”

“Harry plays well?”

“I think so. He’s quick on a broom, much quicker than James ever was.”

“Quick is good for a Seeker.”

She realized, too late to laugh, that he was being funny. They shared a brief but uncomfortable silence, interrupted only when James came downstairs.

There was a quiet exchange of good mornings. James gave Lily a kiss, and she was pleased, despite his messy hair and scruffy chin, that he’d already brushed his teeth. She didn’t blame him for getting a poor night’s sleep, but she wasn’t sure how she felt about going to Hogwarts with him looking like that. They still had a lot of people to keep up appearances for, and any number of them could be present at the game.

Remus and Sirius came downstairs not far behind James, though they looked considerably more presentable.

Sirius snorted when he caught sight of James. “Really?”

James rubbed his chin. “I’m thinking of growing it out.”

“Well, stop. It looks weird.”
“I had a beard before.”

“When Harry was three,” Remus said quietly, “and how many photographs are there of those four months?”

“It clearly left an impression on you,” James said, voice growing defensive. He looked to her for help. “Lily liked it.”

She bit down on her lip.

He looked utterly betrayed. “You said it looked distinguished.”

Lily searched for the right words, ones that wouldn’t hurt his pride. “Well, yes, but it never looked like you.”

“You’re saying I’m not distinguished?”

“Not by half,” said Sirius.

“Try again in a few more years,” said Remus. “You’re only thirty-five.”

“If thirty-five isn’t old enough for a beard, what is?” he said grumpily, but got up and left the table, presumably to shave.

Lily finished her coffee and poured a second cup. She still felt like she would fall asleep if she closed her eyes any longer than it took to blink. She hoped the weather would be cold enough to keep her awake for the Quidditch match. Then again, perhaps the anxiety of seeing Harry on a broom with Bludgers flying around him would be enough to keep her from falling asleep in her seat.

She stood up and began to clear the dishes, despite Regulus’s protests that Kreacher could take care of it. Lily needed to move, to be on her feet. Remus got up to help her dry. They promised they wouldn’t break anything.

James came back downstairs, looking much more presentable. Scruff shaved, robes pressed, and hair combed — as neatly as he could, at least. He and Harry had the same problem of hair that never wanted to lie flat. James looked, she thought, a lot like he had when he’d proposed. Perhaps with darker shadows under his eyes, a little more weight in his cheeks, and wrinkles in the corner of his eyes, but he was very much the same person she’d married. Maybe he was a touch more distinguished.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

She pulled the last plate out of the soapy water, rinsed it, and handed it to Remus.

“Yes.”

“You don’t want to change?” he asked her. “Touch up your makeup?”

“Do I need to?”

“You made me shave.”

Lily stuck her tongue out at him, but he had a point. She’d been up all night and probably looked like it. They still had time before they had to leave, so she poured herself a third cup of coffee and went upstairs to freshen up.
Washing her face helped wake her up, helped her feel more like a human being again and less like an Inferius. She changed into a nice set of red robes, festive for the Quidditch match. She was just putting on her lipstick when she heard a voice downstairs that didn’t belong to her husband, Remus, Sirius, nor Regulus.

She finished up her coffee and headed back to the kitchen, surprised to see Amos Diggory there with Remus and James. Sirius and Regulus were nowhere to be found, which Lily took to be a dangerous sign, but she didn’t have any space left in her brain to worry about it.

“Amos!” she said. “We weren’t expecting you this morning. Breakfast?”

“No, thank you.” He reached into his robe and pulled out a small package wrapped in golden paper. “Just wanted to give you this before you left.”

Lily glanced at James, quickly running her head through birthdays and anniversaries, but nothing came to mind.

“It’s for Ced,” Amos said. “Seeing as we can’t trust the post these days, I thought I’d send it with you. It was his birthday last month, and Fiona and I wanted to send him a little something.”

“Oh, of course,” Lily said.

“It’s no trouble at all.” James picked the package up off of the table. “We’ll give him your best, and ours.”

“Thanks. It means a lot.”

Lily waited for Amos to leave, but he made no movement towards the door. He was hesitating, and it looked like he was trying to think of something else to say.

“There was a moment where Lily thought Amos might tell them everything was fine and leave, but the weight of whatever was on his mind seemed too much for him to bear. He sank into the table and put his head into his hands. “No, it’s… it’s just everything, you know, but Fiona, she’s — she’s taken this real hard.”

Lily glanced surreptitiously at the clock. She did not want to be late to Harry’s game. But James chose to sit down beside Amos, so she put a comforting hand on Amos’s shoulder.

“There was a moment where Lily thought Amos might tell them everything was fine and leave, but the weight of whatever was on his mind seemed too much for him to bear. He sank into the table and put his head into his hands. “No, it’s… it’s just everything, you know, but Fiona, she’s — she’s taken this real hard.”

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“These last couple months,” Amos continued, “she’s been a mess. Cedric wanted to go to breakfast before he went off to Hogwarts, and we didn’t think anything of it. It’d been a tough summer, you know? But… I just don’t know how you do it.”

“You’re going to have to give us a bit more than that, mate,” said James.

Amos took a deep breath. “Ced told us that morning that he’s still having nightmares, even though he’d already told Fiona it was getting better. He said he keeps dreaming about dying, and he told us he wanted to quit Quidditch and give up his prefect duties. I told him he wasn’t allowed to give up his prefect badge. He said he wanted more time to focus on his school work, since his N.E.W.T.s are coming up, but he’s never struggled with school before. He’s always been a hard worker, balancing school, responsibilities, and Quidditch. He’s always told us he likes being busy and doing things. Then this week we get a letter from his Head of House saying he’s been missing his Runes class nearly every day, and has missed several Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. Fiona and I don’t know what to do, and she’s already stressed to end of her wand about one of us getting
hurt, or worse. This letter just about sent her over the edge. She’s worried about Cedric, like something’s wrong with him because of what happened to him.”

Lily, impatient as she was to get to Harry’s match, was glad they’d stayed to listen. She’d been worried about Amos and Fiona, who hadn’t fought in this war before like she and James had. She’d been worried, too, about Cedric, who had seemed so tired all summer. Though none of what Amos had said had been good, she was glad to finally hear it.

“And you two,” Amos waved a hand at James and Lily without looking at them, “seem fit as Flitterbys. And Harry seems to be doing alright. How are you doing it?”

“I promise we’re not,” Lily said, “though I’m not sure that’s encouraging.”

“I think Harry and Cedric are going through a lot of the same stuff,” said James. “It’s good they have each other.”

“Is Harry skipping classes and dropping responsibilities?” There was an edge of anger in Amos’s voice.

Lily nearly snapped back at him, but James took her hand and she wisely said nothing.

“He’s getting into detention,” James said, in a far calmer voice than Lily would have used. She was glad one of them had gotten some sleep. “He’s stressed and frustrated and scared. We all are, Amos. You and Fiona aren’t alone.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with Cedric,” Remus added. “You and Fiona are right to be worried, but he’s eighteen, and all you can do is be there for him. It’s going to take him time to work through this, but you’ll get through it. We all will.”

“Of course, of course you’re right,” Amos said, though his voice sounded hollow.

“Come by for dinner some time,” Lily offered. “The more the merrier, really, and it’ll help, being with friends.”

“Dinner,” Amos echoed, like he didn’t quite understand the word. “Of course. I’ll talk to Fiona about it.” He checked the pocket watch in his robe and rubbed his eyes. “Well, I’d better get to the office.”

“Stop by anytime,” James said. “I don’t mean to speak for Regulus and Sirius, but you and Fiona are always welcome, Order business or not.”

“Yes, we will. Thank you.”

“Remus,” Lily said as they stood, “you’re still welcome to come.”

But Remus shook his head. She understood why.

It was difficult for him to return to Hogwarts, to be among his old students and co-workers. He’d had the same reservations about attending the Triwizard Tournament, but in the end they’d all been glad he went. He and Sirius had both been invaluable that night. Today, though, Remus and Sirius had agreed to hold down Headquarters. Lily suspected Sirius’s real motivation to stay was to keep an eye on Regulus. Lily didn’t blame him, not after Regulus had nearly been caught twice.

They all said their goodbyes to Remus, and James, Lily, and Amos left together. Once on the street, Amos headed for the Ministry, and James and Lily Apparated to their cottage in Hogsmeade.
They’d agreed not to use the Floo Network, not after Regulus’s scare with Umbridge. Even though James and Lily wouldn’t be doing anything wrong by using the Floos, it just seemed safer to leave them out of the equation all together. They also weren’t keen on Flooing right into Dumbledore’s office. The more distance they kept between themselves and Dumbledore, the better for Dumbledore and the Order.

For the Triwizard Tournament, there had been large crowds hiking the path from the town of Hogsmeade up to the castle. On this grey Saturday, however, there was no one on the path. James and Lily walked hand-in-hand through the shops, over the bridge, and up the hill towards the Quidditch pitch.

Lily felt a shiver down her spine as they did. The last time she’d taken this path had been for the third event of the Triwizard Tournament. This was only Quidditch, she reminded herself. Harry had played more than half a dozen games like this before. It would be alright.

The closer they got to the castle, the more students they saw. Lily checked James’s watch with disappointment. She’d wanted to arrive before breakfast was over so they’d have more time with Harry but the match was due to start in less than thirty minutes. They’d have to see him afterwards. She prayed that spending time with Harry after a Quidditch match did not mean a hospital visit. Two matches ending in that was more than enough for any parent.

They were a few feet from the crowds of students streaming into the stadium when James stopped suddenly. Lily followed his gaze to the south side of the castle where Hagrid’s hut stood, looking empty and lonely on the edge of the forest.

“No news is good news,” she said, and squeezed his hands.

“I was just thinking…. We usually sit with him and the students. Should we ought to go up to the parents’ and teachers’ box this time?”

Lily wondered if this was truly prompted by Hagrid’s absence or by the earlier criticism of his “distinguished” look.

“If you really want to. I wouldn’t mind saying hello to Minerva.”

“How can you call her that so easily? I still want to call her Professor whenever I see her.”

“We did teach together, briefly. It made it a little easier. Do you see Cedric anywhere?”

“No,” James frowned. “If we don’t see him, we could give it to Pomona.”

“Oh, so you can call Pomona by her first name, but not Minerva?”

“One of them was a much more terrifying figure in my life,” James said. “And one of them still looks at me like she’s considering whether not skinning me alive is worth the trouble.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “She doesn’t look at you like that.”

“Yes she does, but only when you’re not looking. Ask Sirius. He’ll tell you.”

Lily allowed herself a little laugh, and James squeezed her hand encouragingly as they climbed the stairs to the teacher and parent box. It was certainly easier to hope things would be brighter on the other side of the war when she had James at her side. He was, without a doubt, her greatest source of strength.
Minerva was already in the box when they arrived. She smiled and waved them over.

“Been a long time,” she said, and shook each of their hands. “Not since the end of the Triwizard Tournament.”

They had seen her two weekends ago, when she’d briefly stopped by Headquarters on a Sunday afternoon to catch up on Order business and to catch James and Lily up on Hogwarts news. Unfortunately, they’d already known the worst of it — Umbridge.

The witch herself walked into the booth with a wide smile on her face, wearing a deep green tweed coat that made her look supremely frog-like. She nodded politely at Minerva, completely ignored James and Lily, and took a seat right in front. That was odd, Lily thought. She hadn’t imagined Umbridge was the sort of person with any interest in Quidditch.

Lily maintained a polite conversation with McGonagall, catching up with innocuous stories that were safe for any ears to hear, Ministry or otherwise. James leaned back in his chair, eyes on the stands as students filed in.

Lily was in the middle of asking McGonagall how some of her star pupils were doing, though all of Lily’s advanced students had graduated from Hogwarts by now, when James interrupted her.

“Hey,” he pressed his elbow into her ribs, “what’s that they’re wearing?” He pointed to the Slytherin section of the crowd. A good number of them had silver badges glinting on their chests.

Lily had no idea and looked to Minerva for help, but she shrugged her shoulders.

“Severus might know.” Minerva turned in her seat, searching for Severus. He was two rows behind them, sitting with Lucius Malfoy. Lily was suddenly fervently glad Sirius had decided not to come with them.

“Severus,” Minerva said, “what is that your students are wearing?”

Severus paused his conversation with Malfoy long enough to give Minerva a disdainful look and to spread his hands in innocence. He returned to his conversation with Malfoy without a word.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose it’s just a bit of team spirit.”

Lily leaned over to whisper in James’s ear, “If Severus can look at Minerva like that, surely you’re brave enough to call her by her first name.”

James snorted, hastily choking down a laugh.

They were kept from further conversation when the two teams walked out of the locker rooms and onto the pitch. It was easy to pick Harry out among three Weasleys and three girls.

“I didn’t know Ron was Keeper,” Lily said, “Good for him.”

“Captains, shake hands,” Madam Hooch’s voice boomed from the center of the Quidditch Pitch.

“Ah, Angelina’s the new captain,” James said. “Good choice.”

Angelina Johnson shook hands with the Slytherin captain. From this distance Lily couldn’t make out who it was, but she could tell it wasn’t Draco Malfoy.

“Mount your brooms!” Madam Hooch put her hand on the box of Quidditch balls. She blew her whistle and released the balls. As she did, all players shot into the air. Ron took his place in front of
the hoops, Angelina, Katie, and Alicia began weaving their way towards the Slytherin side of the
pitch, Fred and George raced Crabbe and Goyle to the Bludgers, and Harry moved away from the
center of the field to observe from above.

“And it’s Johnson,” Lee Jordan’s voice came over the speaker, “Johnson with the Quaffle, what a
player that girl is, I’ve been saying it for years but she still won’t go out with me —”

“Jordan!” Minerva shouted at him, and Lily saw why Minerva had sat here, beside the announcer’s
box, instead of down in front.

“Just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest — and she’s ducked Warrington, she’s passed
Montague, she’s — ouch — been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe…. Montague catches
the Quaffle, Montague headed back up the pitch and — nice Bludger there, George Weasley, that’s
a Bludger to the head for Montague, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell, Katie Bell of
Gryffindor reverse passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet’s away — dodge’s Warrington, avoids a
Bludger — close call, Alicia — and the crowds are loving this, just listen to them, what’s that
they’re singing?”

Lily frowned, struggling to make out the song coming from the Slytherin half of the pitch.

Weasley cannot save a thing,               
He cannot block a single ring,            
That’s why Slytherins all sing:   
Weasley is our King.

Weasley was born in a bin,               
He always lets the Quaffle in,          
Weasley will make sure we win,       
Weasley is our King.

Jordan resumed his narration of the game quickly, as if he could use his announcements to cover
up the song.

“What a rude song,” she said.

“I presume,” Minerva said loud enough for Severus to hear, “that whoever is responsible will be
properly reprimanded.”

“Of course,” Severus answered, “though it may be hard to locate a single culprit for this.”

Lily watched, stomach sinking lower and lower as Angelina missed her shot and Ron missed his
first save, and his second, and his third….

It was the worst Quidditch game Lily had ever watched. She’d always worried about Harry’s
safety, but she had never worried about Harry losing a game. He had only lost once before, and it
was hardly his fault. Watching such a one-sided game now left her feeling horrible, and she knew
James had to feel the same, or perhaps worse. There would be no exciting recap for Sirius and
Remus that evening.

The score was forty to ten, Slytherin leading, when Harry dove suddenly for the Slytherin end of
the Quidditch pitch.

Lily gasped, as she always did, when Harry dove and grabbed James’s hand. He was neck and neck
with Malfoy as they raced each other towards the ground, but Harry was seconds faster. His hand
closed around the Snitch, the game ended with a loud cheer from the Gryffindor side of the pitch,
Harry was hit, square in the back, by a Bludger. Lily rocketed to her feet as he tumbled forward, off of his broom, falling five feet or so into the grass. McGonagall stood, too, shouting down at the pitch in protest of the illegal shot.

There was a moment where Lily’s heart stopped beating, and she knew it would not begin again until Harry stood, but he didn’t move. He stayed, splayed out on the grass, until Madam Hooch helped him to his feet. Lily felt all the tension in her shoulders relax.

James wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed tightly. “He’s okay. And he won.”

“Well,” Severus’s voice came from behind them, “I suppose I should deal with discipline. Good day, Lucius.”

“Good day, Severus.”

Lily felt all her fear and anxiety course back into her blood just at the sound of Lucius’s voice. She hated him, with every fiber of her being, she hated Lucius Malfoy nearly as much as she hated Voldemort. The only real difference was that she feared Voldemort in a way she didn’t fear Malfoy. It made her anger far more dangerous.

“I suppose we’d better find Cedric,” James said, and stretched his arms over his head. “I’d wager a guess he was sitting on the Gryffindor side of the pitch.”

Lily risked a glance back at Malfoy, but he was already leaving the stands. There was no use confronting him now. If anything, it would make the Order’s job harder in the future.

Lily was just about to suggest they head down towards the castle in hopes of catching Cedric when she saw Harry and George sprinting across the field at Draco Malfoy and before Lily could even shout Harry’s name, Harry had punched Draco in the stomach.

“Harry!” she and James screamed at once, but the brawl had already broken out. Harry and George did not stop their assault on Draco Malfoy until Madam Hooch threw them apart with an Impediment Jinx.

Minerva stared at the pitch in utter shock. Then, slowly, her lips pressed into a thin line. As Madam Hooch shouted at George and Harry to see their Head of House immediately, Minerva turned and stormed up to the castle without a word to James and Lily.

Lily felt her hands shaking with anger, but she wasn’t entirely sure where the anger was directed. She was upset with Harry, certainly, for his poor decorum after she’d told him time and time again not to duel, but a part of her knew Harry must have had a reason for fighting with Draco, and she wanted to take it out on Lucius.

James shoved the small gold package into Lily’s hands. “You find Cedric. I’ll take care of Harry.”

“No, we can both —”

“Lily,” he said, voice strangely calm, “you’re tired and you’re angry. Find Cedric, and let me take care of this.”

Lily imagined storming into Minerva’s office and demanding Harry be banned from Hogsmeade trips and grounding him for an entire summer that was still seven months away. James had a point.
She nodded, and he kissed her forehead before sprinting after Minerva.

Umbridge got up from her seat in front and smiled at Lily. “Good day, Mrs. Potter. What a shame about your son.”

Lily’s usually silver tongue suddenly felt like lead, and she wished James were still with her for one moment longer. She did not like this woman’s immovable smile, the way she walked steadily, as if the match had gone perfectly smoothly instead of ending in utter chaos. And before Lily could think of anything to say that would be two parts clever and one part polite, Umbridge was gone.

Lily took three deep breaths before walking down to the ground floor of the stadium. Luckily, the end of the match excitement had kept students in their seats a good deal longer than usual, and most of them were only just beginning to exit. A handful of seventh years waved at her as they passed. A few fourth years whispered to each other and clustered closer together. Lily did not remember all of her students, but of the familiar faces, they seemed equal parts solemn and wary towards her. She wondered if things would be different if she had stayed on as a teacher instead of leaving at the end of the school year. Would more students believe her? Would she have been able to stay there long enough to prevent Umbridge from becoming the Defense teacher?

She saw Cedric on the other side of the crowd, flanked by two girls talking animatedly about the Quidditch match. The older one she recognized easily as Amber. The younger one she knew she’d had as a first year, only because she remembered she’d taught Amber’s sister, but she couldn’t remember her name.

“Cedric!”

He turned, but did not see her, so she shouted again. This time Amber saw her, and pulled Cedric through the crowd of students to meet her.

“Professor Potter,” the younger girl said with a wide smile.

“Just Mrs. Potter,” Lily said. “Cedric, your parents asked me to give this to you.” She handed him the gold-wrapped package. “They say Happy Birthday, and James and I wanted to wish you the same.”

Cedric stared at the package for a moment, like he wasn’t sure what to do with it. But he’d always been a polite boy and his manners came back quickly. He took the package from her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Potter. I appreciate it.” He did not sound particularly grateful, actually Lily wasn’t sure he sounded like much of anything at all. She remembered the confident, grinning boy who had participated in the Triwizard Tournament, and the young man looking at her seemed like a washed out version of that glittering hero. War, she thought, brought out the worst in everyone.

He looked back down at the gift, then met her eyes. There was a familiar fire in them suddenly, though she didn’t know where she’d seen it before.

“Actually, Mrs. Potter, would it be alright if I talk to you about something?”

Lily glanced at the castle. She was anxious to get back to James and Harry, but as she had stayed to talk to Amos, she felt she ought to stay and talk to Cedric. “Of course. Shall we walk down to the lake?”

“Just the edge of the castle is fine. I’ll see you guys in the common room,” he said to the sisters.

The girls hesitated, and Lily saw a protectiveness in their eyes. She was glad Cedric had friends to
look out for him.

“I won’t let him stay with me too long,” she said.

The girls said their goodbyes and disappeared into the tail end of the crowd of students.

“Is everything alright?” she asked, even though she knew it couldn’t be. They walked slowly, making an arc just outside the path of the crowd.

“I was only wondering….” Cedric hesitated, like he didn’t know what words were the ones he needed. “You were my teacher for only part of the school year, but I felt like I learned a lot from you.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“And I know you’re an excellent dueler.”

“You’re just flattering me now. What do you want?” But she was smiling as she said it, hoping he might perk up if she teased him.

He did not. “Do you think I could be an Auror?”

Lily hesitated. She was certain Cedric had the skills to be an Auror, but his temperament was something else. Then again, Lily would have never pegged Tonks as the type to be an Auror.

“Have you asked Professor Sprout?”

“She thinks I should stick to the Magical Creature fieldwork we’d planned on in my fifth year. That just feels so useless now.”

Lily understood. On the edge of a war, she had felt it too. Did any of her classes besides Defense matter? And how must Cedric feel, being in a Defense class where he wasn’t learning anything. It was no wonder he couldn’t find the motivation to attend classes.

“James could have been a professional Quidditch player,” she said, “and I could’ve gone into Potions research. You know, I could have probably invented the Wolfsbane Potion, if I’d spent time working at it, if I’d poured myself into my studies. But I didn’t, because I threw my heart into Defense Against the Dark Arts. I’m not saying I made the wrong choice, nor am I saying James did. But war is only for a time. Don’t pour yourself into something you don’t want to do forever. You’re young, and you want to make a difference, but it’s important you choose the way you want to help. If you pick something because you feel like you have to, you won’t be happy in the long run.”

“Are you happy with your choice, then?”

She answered as honestly as she could. “Most days.”

Cedric was quiet for a moment, then he said, “Thanks. That really helps.”

“I’m glad.”

“Before we go inside, I want you to know, Harry’s a really good teacher.”

“What?”

“I thought you knew. The Defense classes?”
“Oh — I’d heard…. Well, I didn’t know you’d managed to get it all together. I hope you don’t get caught.”

“Oh, no, we’ve got it all worked out.” Cedric glanced up at the castle. “Maybe at Christmas, Harry can tell you all about it.”

“I’m sure he will.”

Lily waited for Cedric to end the conversation. She did not want to go inside if he wasn’t done talking. But he must’ve said all he needed to say because he started up the steps into the entrance hall. He said his goodbyes, then headed off to his common room. Lily went straight up to Minerva’s office.

She arrived just in time to see Umbridge emerge with a pleased smile on her face. Lily thought that could not bode well.

The inside of Minerva’s office was just as concerning. Minerva was staring after Umbridge with a hard expression, looking angrier than Lily had ever seen her. Her jaw was tightened in a way that looked as if it might never move again. Her face was flushed red and her eyes were cold.

James looked shell-shocked, and George Weasley looked furious, and Harry….

Lily had never seen Harry so angry before. His eyes seemed to burn with rage, and Lily noticed that familiar spark she had just in Cedric’s eyes. She hadn’t recognized it in Cedric’s gray eyes, but she knew what it was the moment she saw it in Harry’s eyes, because they were also her eyes. It was the fire she’d seen in herself when she’d been fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen, when she’d been old enough to realize there was a war happening around her, and she’d wanted to fight for herself.

She and James had been foolish to think they could ever keep Harry out of this fight.

“What’s happened?”

“Banned,” James said, voice as hollow as Amos’s had been earlier. “They’ve been banned from Quidditch.”

“She can’t do that, can she?” Lily looked to Minerva who said nothing, but nodded once.

“As she can do whatever the bloody hell she wants around here,” George snapped, getting to his feet. “She’s got ‘Cornelius — Hem. Hem. — Excuse me, the Minister’ on her side.”

“Mr. Weasley!” Minerva said. “I can still put you in a week’s worth detention, if you like.”

“Sorry, Professor,” though George didn’t sound particularly sorry as he left the classroom with a half-hearted goodbye to James and Lily.

“You’d better get going, too, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said, voice tight. “Unless you’d like to stay and have a discussion with your parents.”

Harry pushed himself to his feet without a word.

“Wait, Harry —” Lily had so much she wanted to say to him, but none of it made its way into her throat. As he stopped to look at her, she saw that he wasn’t just angry. He looked diminished, not just tired but worn thin, the way Cedric had, too. His shoulders looked heavy, his eyes were as exhausted as hers each morning, his face was unusually pale, and though Harry had always been rather lanky like his father, she was almost certain he’d lost weight. There was something terribly
She wished they didn’t have to wait until Christmas for a real conversation.

In lieu of asking him what was wrong — because if she was honest with herself, she knew all the answers to that question — she pulled Harry into a hug. It did not last nearly as long as she wanted or needed. Harry pulled away quickly and rubbed at his eyes. Lily noticed a bandage on the back of Harry’s hand.

“What happened?” she asked, reaching for him again.

He pulled his hand from her reach. “Malfoy scratched it trying to get the Snitch from me.”

As plausible as this sounded, Lily saw no signs that the wound was fresh. And yet she could not understand why Harry would lie to her.

“Harry, don’t —”

“Bye Mum, Dad. I’ll see you at Christmas.”

She watched him go, feeling too many things for how tired she was, yet too tired to feel much of anything.

James put a hand on her elbow. “Bye, Minnie,” he said, and something told Lily she was supposed to laugh at this, but she didn’t have it in her. She only continued staring down the hall after Harry, wondering what had happened to Harry in these two months.

“Will we be seeing you soon?” James asked.

“I’m sure you can see I have my hands full here,” Minerva said, voice still tight with restrained anger.

“Yeah, I noticed. Let us know if we can help, and give Dumbledore our best.”

Lily turned back to look at McGonagall, watched her open her mouth once then close it. Then she spoke.

“Of course. Good day.”

“Good day,” Lily echoed. She let James lead her out of Minerva’s office and downstairs, out of the castle.

When they had stepped off the grounds, onto the path to Hogsmeade, James let out a long, heavy sigh. Lily slipped her hand into his and leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked. It was not the most comfortable way to walk, but she wanted the contact, especially after Harry had denied it to her.

“My father had a beard,” James said as they started across the bridge. “For as long as I knew him, he used to put his Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion on it every morning to keep it neat.”

It wasn’t until they had completely passed over the small stream and were halfway through the center of town that Lily found the words to answer. “You’ve fought one war as yourself. You can fight another.”

“Sometimes I’m not so sure.”
“We can fight another.”

James squeezed her hand. “My dad was like, sixty-something when I was born.”

“You’ve got lots of time, then,” though Lily, and James, too, knew that time was something she could not count on.

They walked into their cottage, not feeling any better about the Quidditch match, Harry’s Quidditch ban, nor their conversation about time. Still, James made the same comment he always made about selling the cottage before they Apparated back to Grimmauld Place. They prepared themselves to deliver the bad news of the day to their friends over lunch, but thankfully their poor news was overshadowed by far better news.

Hagrid was back.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons area always appreciated!
Hagrid's Tale

Chapter Summary

James and Lily return to Grimmauld Place to find an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short. Words haven't been working for me this week.

But we are so close to Christmas. So close. Shit's gonna get real when Harry goes home.

Shout out to my beta, ageofzero, who takes evenings to read through chapters without even waiting for me to ask them, even when they have to work the next day. My hero and savior, truly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All of James’s fears, worries, and anger over Umbridge melted away for a moment at the sight of Hagrid at the kitchen table. No news was good news, so they’d kept saying, but James had been worried. His worry, it seemed, had been valid, because Hagrid’s left eye was bruised, nearly swollen shut. His hands were cut up, too, and James wondered what sort of fight Hagrid had been in on his trip to the giants. Still, he was glad to know that, at the very least, Hagrid was returned and safe. He appeared to be in the middle of of sharing his story with Sirius, Remus, and Dumbledore.

Seeing Dumbledore was also something of a relief for James, like when he’d broken his arm as a child and his mother had repaired it, or the way it had felt to be able to hand an infant Harry off to Lily after a long day alone with the baby. It was the kind of relief that came with knowing that responsibility did not rest entirely on his shoulders, that someone else had the situation well in hand.

But a part of him flared up in anger. He wanted to know why Dumbledore had to be here, listening to Hagrid, instead of at school, protecting students, like Harry, Fred, and George, from Umbridge’s absurd decrees. He knew that anger wasn’t fair of him. Dumbledore had to manage the Order — someone had to — and there was probably no other wizard in the world who could but Dumbledore. He still didn’t like that Hogwarts was under the thumb of the Ministry right now.

“We wen’ down with the next presen’ we’d meant ter give ter Karkus. It was a no go before I’d —” Hagrid paused his story to smile at James and Lily. “Good ter see you two!”

Dumbledore smiled at them, too. “Ah. How was Quidditch?”

Lily slumped into a chair. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

Sirius groaned. “We lost?”
“Gryffindor won,” said James, “but we lost.” He sank into the seat beside Lily. “I don’t feel like spoiling it. I’m sure Minerva is dying to vent to you about it,” he said to Dumbledore.

James expected Dumbledore to press, but, true to his sage-like reputation, he wisely refrained. “Hagrid was just recounting his tale with the giants. It seems our efforts were spoiled by a bit of bad luck. There was a change in power, and the new Gurg did not take kindly to wizards.”

“Well,” Hagrid says, “It wasn’t wizards he objected to, it was just us. Couple of Death Eaters were visiting him ev’ry day, bringing gifts ter the Gurg, an’ he wasn’ dangling them upside down.”

“You’re sure they were Death Eaters?” Sirius asked.

“Course I’m sure. I recognized Macnair. Didn’ know ‘is partner, but I remember that maniac.”

“You didn’t engage them, did you?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, but they knew we was around — ‘spect the new Gurg Golgomath told ‘em about us. At night, when the giants were sleepin’ an’ we wen’ lookin’ for ones hidin’ in the caves hopin’ they might be persuaded, Macnair an’ the other one were sneakin’ round the mountains lookin’ fer us. I was hard put to stop Olympe jumpin’ out at them. She was rarin’ ter attack ‘em…. She’s somethin’ when she’s roused, Olympe…. Fiery, yeh know… ‘spect it’s the French in her.”

James was both touched and made supremely uncomfortable by this romantic side of Hagrid. He’d known Hagrid since he was a boy and had never considered Hagrid particularly romantic, but he supposed everyone had parts of themselves that lay hidden or dormant for long periods of time.

“Were you able to convince some of the giants, then?” asked Remus.

“I reckon we had abou’ six or seven o’ them convinced at one poin’. Then Golgomath’s lot raided the caves. The ones tha’ survived didn’ wan’ no more ter do with us after that.”

All of James’s relief seemed like a waste now. He tried to tell himself there was worse ways today could have gone, but it wasn’t a lot of comfort.

“If you didn’t engage Death Eaters, what happened to your face?” asked Lily.

“That’s nothing,” Hagrid waved off the question and stood. He picked his big cloak up from the table and pulled it on. “I’d better be off. Got some lessons ter plan. Stuff ter take care of.”

“I’m sure the students will be glad to have you back,” said Lily.

“I’m off to the Ministry,” said Dumbledore, standing as well. He picked up a sealed scroll, a summary of Order operations for the last month. James knew there was nothing particularly critical inside. They were in an unfortunate period of waiting, while each side tried to shore up resources. In this case, resources meant people and information. James wished there was a way to be sure they were winning, but it was a game where no one would know the score of until it was over.

James, Lily, Sirius, and Remus, all walked Hagrid and Dumbledore to the door. The minute they were gone, Sirius demanded, “What happened at Quidditch?”

“She said she didn’t want to talk about it,” Remus said.

“I don’t know if I can talk about it,” Lily said, voice still full of poorly restrained anger, “at least not without tearing into Umbridge for three hours.”
“I don’t think anyone here would object to that,” James said, “but you should probably get some rest. You still haven’t slept.”

“I’m too angry to sleep.”

“You’re too tired not to.”

Lily stuck her tongue out at him but they both knew James was right.

“Fine. I’ll sleep. But… James, we have to tell Harry about the prophecy.”

“So you finally see reason,” Sirius snapped. “Only took you five years —”

“Shut up, Sirius. You don’t understand. He’s not —” Lily broke off before she finished her sentence and rubbed her forehead.

“Not what? Were you going to say not my son? As if Remus and I haven’t done as much for Harry as you and James have, as if we haven’t put our lives on the line —”

“Sirius, let it go,” Remus said quietly.

James felt relieved once more to hear Lily say she finally felt ready to tell Harry the prophecy. Harry’s words from that summer had been eating at James these last couple months. Harry had accused them of making a promise they’d never intended to keep, and it had been true. They’d always planned on keeping the prophecy from Harry until he turned seventeen. Maybe it had been right to conceal it still, when Harry was twelve, but since Voldemort’s return, which had come far earlier than James or Lily would have liked — James had honestly hoped to be dead and gone before Voldemort came back — Harry needed to know the truth.

Still, James had one reservation: “Dumbledore’s asked us not to.”

Lily pressed her lips together in a thin line. Sirius, too, looked like he was restraining an outburst of his own.

“Do we know why Dumbledore’s asked us this?” Remus said.

“It’s his stupid connection with Voldemort.” Lily rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. She was so clearly exhausted. James wanted to tell her to go to bed, but the words died on his tongue. She’d only get more stubborn the more he asked. “Dumbledore’s afraid of Voldemort realizing the connection, of getting curious and poking around in Harry’s head.”

Remus and Sirius exchanged a look, and James knew their silent exchange said, “They never told me about this. You didn’t know either?”

“Let’s have this discussion when you’re better rested,” James suggested, and braced himself for her to stubbornly refuse.

She seemed truly worn down, though, not just by her sleepless night, but by the day’s events.

“Yeah, okay. I’m going to bed.”

James kissed her cheek, and the boys listened to her quiet footsteps pad their way upstairs.

“When were you going to tell us?” Sirius asked.

James stifled a yawn and poked his head in the empty parlor. “Where’s Regulus?”
“He spends most of his day missing in action.” Sirius folded his arms over his chest. “Are you asking because you want him around or you want to make sure he isn’t?”

“It doesn’t matter, really, I guess.” James sank into one of the chairs. He had a few memories from his childhood in this room, cold teas with Sirius’s family, complete with strangely polite conversation for how unpleasantly everyone must have felt.

Remus sat down in the chair beside the window. “I know it can’t be easy to talk about some of these things Harry’s going through, but Sirius and I need to be kept in the loop. We can’t help you if you don’t tell us.”

James wanted to laugh. “You sound like Harry.”

Sirius leaned against the door frame. James wondered if his refusal to take a seat was out of anger or if he was listening for Regulus. “Aren’t there spells Harry can learn to keep Voldemort out? Have Dumbledore teach him.”

James ran a hand over his face. “I know, but right now… Think about it this way, if you’ve got an empty building, no one’s going to notice it. Once you start putting stuff in it, people get interested. Or if you suddenly started putting a fence around it, people are going to ask why. So I guess we’re hoping we can just make sure Harry goes unnoticed as long as possible.”

Remus shook his head.

Sirius laughed. “You’re kidding, right? That’s as naive as hoping that Harry would stay out of this fight all together.”

James didn’t like how right Sirius sounded. Voldemort was eventually going to take notice of his connection to Harry. Even Harry had to have noticed it by now. They should make sure Harry was ready to defend himself. But James was no expert on magic related to the mind. That was not a skill he possessed.

“We’ll talk to Dumbledore,” he said. “We’ll see what all of our options are.”

Sirius and Remus had another silent conversation. James interpreted this one as an evaluation of his solution. They seemed to decide they would not be able to convince him to do anything more than talk to Dumbledore. He wondered if that was because they agreed that was the right next step or they thought he would stubbornly refuse to do anything else.

“So what happened at Quidditch today?” asked Sirius.

James did not like this topic much better than the topic they had just been discussing. He knew, however, this was definitely information Sirius and Remus needed to hear.

“Umbridge banned Harry from Quidditch,” James told them, “for punching Draco Malfoy.”

Remus frowned. “Why does Umbridge have that authority? Doesn’t that belong to McGonagall?”

“Some Educational Decree or other.” James rubbed his eyes, suddenly overcome with exhaustion. “McGonagall just wanted to give Harry detention for a week. Pretty reasonable for a violent fight, I thought. That’s what you got when you and Regulus got thrown out of the Three Broomsticks, isn’t it?” he asked Sirius.

“I got a week of detention; Slughorn let Reg off with some lines.”
“Well, anyway, a week is fine. Then Umbridge comes in waving her new decree, and she….” James paused. This was the part of the story he didn’t understand. “Remember how Harry said she’d dissolved Quidditch and wasn’t letting Gryffindor reform?”

“I remember,” said Remus, who had been the one to tell everyone about Regulus’s near-capture in the fire, and the conversation with Harry.

“Umbridge said that McGonagall had gone over her head to Dumbledore in order to get the Gryffindor Quidditch team reformed. She also said that McGonagall had gone over her head to Dumbledore about detentions of some sort. She said something about McGonagall having no right to question how she ran her classroom, and no right to question how she did her job. But why would McGonagall complain to Dumbledore about Umbridge administering detentions?”

“Maybe,” Remus started slowly, “her detentions unfairly target Harry. That seems to be Umbridge’s pattern. Refusing to teach her students, refusing to let Gryffindor Quidditch team reform, putting Harry into detention for slights, banning him from Quidditch all together. Perhaps Minerva went to Dumbledore complaining of Umbridge’s unfairness.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it.” James rubbed his hand over his recently-smoothed chin. He wasn’t quite convinced of Remus’s argument.

Sirius caught his eye and and James knew what Sirius wanted to say. But they’d already had this argument. Though he was not sure Remus was right, James could not imagine Sirius’s suspicions about Umbridge were true. He could not conceive of a teacher physically hurting a student.

“How many are we for dinner?” James asked, eager to change the subject.

“The Prewetts and Kingsley are supposed to stop by between shifts,” Remus said. “Frank and Alice will probably join them if they come from work.”

“Don’t forget Tonks,” Sirius said.

Judging by the pink that spread across Remus’s cheeks, he had not forgotten Tonks. He had only left her name off to spare himself the embarrassment of being teased for remembering her.

“That’s quite a crowd.” James stood and stretched. “Let’s see what we have to cook and what we need to buy.”

“I don’t know how I feel about you and Sirius putting together a meal,” Remus said.

“I cook,” James protested. “I’ve made you several dinners.”

“I was more commenting on you and Sirius working together. The two of you are bad influences on each other in the kitchen.”

“I’m content to not help,” Sirius laughed. “You two take care of dinner.”

James tried to find an argument against this, but Remus had a point. He and Sirius liked causing trouble, and there was so much trouble to be had in the kitchen.

James and Remus put together a decent dinner while Sirius made unhelpful comments. Lily woke just in time to set the table for the large party of guests. Regulus reappeared shortly before dinner was ready. James was unsurprised. Regulus always turned up for food, like a cat listening for the sounds of a tuna can opening.
As their friends arrived, a terrible day slowly became a much better evening. A house filled with guests was always better than an empty one. This war, James thought, had only been survivable because he had had good friends at his side. He was more than glad they were standing here with him again.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
The Eye of the Snake

Chapter Summary

Hagrid's back; Harry has a dream.

Chapter Notes

Only forty-five minutes late, technically. Not bad considering I started writing at about five pm today. Oops! Things have just been really hectic. I start a new job on Monday, and I'm really excited!

This chapter is unbetaed, and that's very much my fault for finishing it at 12:45am after the due date. If my beta has any corrections for this chapter, I'll add them later. It's more important to me to keep a consistent posting schedule than anything else right now.

That aside, I really hope you enjoy this chapter! A few subtle changes in this one, but good changes, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the kind of day that was perfect for Quidditch. The air was cold and crisp, but it was clear. It was bright, but the snow was muddy enough on the pitch that it wouldn’t reflect in a Seeker’s eyes and mask the Snitch. All in all, Harry wanted to be out on his broom.

But his broom was locked away in Umbridge’s office. And Harry was all but locked in Gryffindor tower, working his way through a mountain of homework.

“We could at least go downstairs and throw some snowballs around,” Ron suggested, though without any real volition. He, like Harry, had a stack of essays and charts to get through. “Any idea when Hermione will be back?”

Harry looked up from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, momentarily distracted from his study of the Silencing Charm.

“Dunno. Depends on how Hagrid takes to her lessons, I guess.”

Hagrid was not interested in Hermione’s lessons, they found out, when she came stomping grumpily back into the common room another hour later. Hagrid, it seemed, didn’t care much about Umbridge’s inspections, despite Harry, Hermione, and Ron’s warnings.

On Tuesday, they headed down for their Care of Magical Creatures lesson, having no idea what was in store for them, but praying, against all odds, it would be something reasonable, something that Umbridge could not fault Hagrid for.

The sight of Hagrid was not reassuring. When Harry, Ron, and Hermione had seen Hagrid last
Saturday, he’d been badly injured. He looked worse today. Harry wondered what horribly
dangerous creature Hagrid could be showing them today. He wanted to be supportive, but he also
wanted to live.

Hagrid stood at the edge of the forest with half of a dead cow slung over his shoulder. He waved
the students over. “We’re workin’ in here today. Bit more sheltered! Anyway, they prefer the
dark.”

Though those words did not bode well with Harry, he appreciated the panicked look on Draco’s
face. Draco had been in the forest once before, and he and Harry had been properly spooked by
Voldemort’s soul hungrily drinking unicorn blood to stay alive. Since then, Harry had been into the
Forbidden Forest a few more times, each trek as deadly as the last. He wasn’t sure how keen he
was about going into the woods again.

“Ready?” Hagrid said as the class surrounded him. “Right, well, I’ve bin savin’ a trip inter the
forest fer yer fifth year. Though we’d go an’ see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what
we’re studyin’ today is pretty rare. I reckon I’m probably the on’y person in Britain who’s
managed ter train ‘em —”

“You’re sure they’re trained, are you?” Malfoy asked, voice strained with terror. “Only it wouldn’t
be the first time you’d brought wild stuff to class, would it?”

Hagrid glared at Malfoy, a look made rather terrifying by the swollen black eye, tinged with green
and yellow on its edges. “Course they’re trained.”

“So what happened to your face, then?”

“Mind yer own business! Now if yeh’ve finished askin’ stupid questions, follow me!”

Hagrid marched straight into the forest, No one immediately followed, but with a heavy sigh,
Hermione pushed forward, Ron and Harry at her sides. The rest of the class made their way in,
probably as reluctant to be left alone as they were to venture in.

For about ten minutes the students walked, shoulder to shoulder, clustered together as tightly as the
trees around them. The reached a point where the branches overhead were so thick that no snow
fell on this earthen floor. The sunlight was dim here, and Parvati cast a Wand-Lighting Charm to
help them see better.

“Best snuff that out,” Hagrid said. “They won’t like it much.” He dropped the cow into a clear
space on the floor. “Gather round now. They’ll be attracted by the smell o’ the meat, but I’m goin’
ter give ‘em a call anyway, ‘cause they’ll like ter know it’s me…..”

As Parvati nervously tucked her wand back into her robes, Hagrid let loose a high-pitched scream,
something like Harry expected a predatory bird to make. It cut through the trees and seemed to fill
the entire grove. None of the students moved, all terrified of what might come out of the forest.
Nothing happened, though, and Hagrid let out another cry.

Another minute passed, and Hagrid let out a third shriek. This time, Harry saw something moving
in the shadows.

A creature like the ones Harry had seen pulling the Hogwarts carriages crept out of the forest.
Horse-like in build, but with a snout like a dragon, and scaly skin pulled taut over its bones. Its
large black wings were folded up at its sides, and its tail swished as it sniffed the air. Harry
wondered if it was blind, judging by its blank white eyes. It had no trouble, either way, finding the
dead cow, ripping into the meat with thick, sharp fangs.

Harry looked around, ready to say, “See, Ron, this is what I was talking about,” but Ron was staring into the trees, still. Most of the students, it seemed, were still looking beyond the creatures at the dark woods. Only Neville and a thin Slytherin boy were watching the cow.

“Ah, here comes another one,” Hagrid said, as a second stepped out from the treeline and joined the first at the body of the cow. “Now, put yer hands up, who can see ‘em?”

Harry raised his hand.

“Yeah, I knew you’d be able ter, Harry,” said Hagrid. “An’ you too Neville, eh? An’ Nott —”

“Excuse me,” Malfoy interrupted, “but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?”

Hagrid gestured to the dead cow. For a moment, no one breathed. Then Parvati screamed. Harry figured it had to be terrifying to see dead bits of flesh vanish into thin air.

“What’s doing it What’s eating it?” Parvati stepped away from the cow.

“Thestrals,” Hagrid said.

Hermione seemed to understand what that meant. Parvati understood, but looked less impressed than Hermione.

“But they’re really, really unlucky!”

“No,” Hagrid laughed, “tha’s jus’ superstition. They arn’ unlucky, they’re dead clever an’ useful. ‘Course, this lot don’ get a lot o’ work. It’s mainly jus’ pullin’ the school carriages unless Dumbledore’s takin’ a long journey an’ don’ want ter Apparate — an’ heres another couple, look.”

Everyone turned, but only Harry, Neville, and Theodore Nott saw two more thestrals step out of the trees. One passed between Lavender and Parvati, both of him squealed.

“Don’ worry. It won’ hurt yeh,” said Hagrid. “Righ’, now, who can tell me why some o’ you can see them an’ other’s can’t?”

Hermione, unsurprisingly, raised her hand. “The only people who can see Thestrals are people who have seen death.”

“Tha’s exactly right. Ten points to Gryffindor. Now, thestrals —”

“Hem, hem.”

Harry turned. Anger and fury boiled up in his stomach just from the sound of her voice. The sight of her, in her green cloak, clipboard in her hand. It took Hagrid a moment to locate her, as he was so tall and she was so short. When he finally did he smiled.

“Hello!”

“You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?” Umbridge said in a loud, slow voice. Harry wondered if she thought Hagrid deaf or slow. Probably both. “Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?”

“Yeah, glad yeh found the place all righ’! As yeh can see — or, I dunno, can you? We’re doin’ thestrals today!”
“I’m sorry?” Umbridge cupped a hand behind her ear. “What did you say?”

Hagrid raised his voice a little, though he looked confused. It was very rare anyone ever asked Hagrid to speak up. “Thestrals,” he repeated. “Big — er — winged horses, yeh know!”

Umbridge frowned and began writing on her clipboard. “Must resort to crude sign language,” she said as she wrote, loud enough for each student and for Hagrid to hear.

Hagrid’s dark and bruised face was tinged with red as he turned back to the class. “Anyway… what was I sayin’?”

“Appears to have poor short term memory.”

Hagrid gave Umbridge a nervous glance, but continued on regardless. “Oh yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an’ five females. This one,” Hagrid patted the neck of the thestral closest to him, “name o’ Tenebrus, he’s my special favorite, firs’ one born here in the forest —”

“Are you aware,” Umbridge interrupted, in her same loud and slow voice, “that the Ministry of Magic has classified thestrals as ‘dangerous’?”

“Thestrals aren’ dangerous!” Hagrid laughed. “The might take a bite outta yeh if yeh really annoy them.”

“Shows signs of pleasure at the idea of violence.”

“Come on! A dog’ll bite yeh if yeh bait it, won’ it — but thestrals have jus’ got a bad reputation because o’ the death thing — people used ter think they were bad omens, didn’ they? Jus’ didn’ understand, did they?”

Umbridge finished writing, but did not answer Hagrid. Instead she said, “Please, continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk —” she motioned with two fingers on her palm “— among the students —” she pointed aggressively at several students “— and ask them questions.” She circled her mouth with a finger, then smiled and moved to talk to Pansy and Draco.

Hermione’s face was scarlet, and tears pricked in the corner of her eyes. Harry didn’t blame her in the least. He was close to feeling similarly.

Harry had seen a lot of variations on how people mistreated “half-breeds” and “Muggle-borns” in his time. Sometimes people were cold, sometimes people were disgusted, sometimes people were just uncomfortable. The worst had certainly been when Remus had been arrested by the Ministry after being wrongfully accused. People had treated Remus like he didn’t matter. His words meant nothing.

Umbridge, Harry thought, was something far worse.

While Hagrid tried to go on with the lesson on thestrals, Umbridge proved to be more disruptive than even Malfoy. She asked Pansy Parkinson, in a loud voice, “Do you find that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?”

Pansy was shaking with restrained laughter. She obviously didn’t find Umbridge’s behavior rude or offensive. Then again, this was the girl who had made fun of Angelina’s hair. “No,” she let out a sharp giggle, “because, well, it sounds like,” she choked on another laugh before starting again, “it sounds like grunting a lot of the time.”
“Maybe you should get your ears checked,” Harry snapped at her, “because most of us can understand him just fine.”

Umbridge looked at Harry, smile still fixed in place, but it looked a little more pleased and a little more surprised. Harry hadn’t mouthed off in front of Umbridge in a while, but that was when she was still holding Gryffindor’s Quidditch games over his head. Now she’d taken them from him entirely. What more did he have to lose?

“Mr. Potter, I will expect you in my office for detention tomorrow evening. Five o’clock sharp.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something back, but Ron hit him before he could.

Umbridge turned her attention from Harry to Neville.

“You can see the thestrals, Longbottom, can’t you?” she asked.

Neville nodded.

“Whom did you see die?”

Harry very nearly told her how rude a question that was, but Hermione tightened her hand around his wrist. He guessed by the tightness, she, too, was having trouble restraining herself.

“My… my grandad,” Neville said.

“And what do you think of them?”

“Erm — they’re okay.”

Umbridge pressed her quill to her clipboard. “Students are too intimidated to admit they are frightened.”

“No!” Neville shouted. “No, I’m not scared of them —”

“It’s quite alright.” Umbridge patted his shoulder — probably because she couldn’t reach the top of his head — and turned back to Hagrid. “Well,” she began in her loud and slow voice once again, “I think I’ve got enough to be getting along with. You will receive the results of your inspection in ten days’ time.” She held up ten fingers, smiled, and left. Malfoy and Pansy dissolved into a bout of laughter. Hermione stared furiously after Umbridge. Neville looked both confused and hurt as he stared after Umbridge, too.

Harry had to fight the urge to fire a spell at Umbridge’s feet and trip her as she marched up to the castle. He would have loved to see her fall flat on her face in the mud. He had a feeling, though, that he would get caught very quickly. And as much as he felt like he had nothing left to lose, he belatedly remembered that nights spent in detention were nights he could not teach his peers Defense Against the Dark Arts.

After their lesson, as they headed back towards the castle for Herbology, Hermione finally snapped. “That foul, lying, twisting old gargoyle. You see what she’s up to? It’s her thing about half-breeds all over again — she’s trying to make out Hagrid’s some kind of dim-witted troll, just because he had a giantess for a mother — and oh, it’s not fair, that really wasn’t a bad lesson at all — I mean, alright, if it had been Blast-Ended Skrewts again, but thestrals are fine — in fact, for Hagrid, they’re really good!”

“Umbridge said they’re dangerous,” Neville said, walking behind Harry so he had to trudge
through less snow.

“‘It’s like Hagrid said — they can look after themselves. I suppose a teacher like Grubbly-Plank won’t usually show them to us before N.E.W.T. level, but, well, they are very interesting, aren’t they? The way some people can see them and some can’t! I wish I could.”

“Oh,” said Neville.

“No, I’m sorry —” Hermione glanced back at Harry and Neville. “I didn’t mean — that was a really stupid thing to say.”

“It’s alright,” Harry said. He wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about being able to see thestrals. The death he’d witnessed was Regulus Black killing Barty Crouch, Jr. It wasn’t so much Barty Crouch, Jr.’s death that bothered Harry as it was knowing Regulus Black was the one who had done it.

But it was like Lily had said: if Regulus had not shown up and killed Barty, Harry might very well have died. Whatever Regulus had done in his past, he seemed to have good intentions.

“I’m surprised so many people could see them,” said Ron. “Three in a class —”

“Yeah, Weasley,” Malfoy’s voice cut through the cold air, “we were just wondering, if you saw someone snuff it, do you reckon you’d be able to see the Quaffle better?”

Crabbe and Goyle laughed as they and Malfoy pushed past Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. The three broke out into a chorus of, “Weasley Is Our King,” a song that could be heard around the halls unfortunately frequently ever since the Quidditch match. At least the badges were infrequent, though Harry suspected they would pop back up at the upcoming match against Hufflepuff in February.

Ron’s ears went red and he seemed like he wanted to bury his head between his shoulders.

“Just ignore them,” Hermione said, though she had been saying it since the Slytherins had begun, and it hadn’t been working.

Harry did not know how to build up Ron’s endurance against these taunts. He suspected the only thing Ron could do would be to get better at Quidditch, or at least more confident at Quidditch. But now that he was grounded, what good could he do?

—— —— ——

December came more quickly than Harry was ready for. Between his mountains of homework, being in and out of detention with Umbridge, and teaching Defense lessons to his friends, the days and weeks blurred into one another. Before Harry even realized it, the holidays had arrived.

Hermione was going skiing with her parents, something Ron and Harry both found amusing. Harry was certain Sirius must have tried it at least once, and made a note to ask his mother if they could give it a try some time. Ron, for his holiday, would be going home to the Burrow. Neville, too, would be going to his parent’s home. Harry wondered if he would be going home to Styncon Garden, or if his parents were still staying with Sirius. Harry missed Picksie and Mellie, but he thought he wouldn’t mind a holiday with the Order of the Phoenix.

On the last evening before the holidays began, Harry arrived early to the D.A. meeting. He found it decorated for Christmas, which was fine, but someone had decided a nice decoration was a strand of golden baubles of Harry’s face. The only person Harry could think of that would do such a thing was Dobby.
As quickly as he could, Harry removed the baubles and shoved them into a cupboard. He had only just closed the cupboard when the door opened and Luna Lovegood made her way inside, looking, as always, like she’d wandered into somewhere she’d never been before.

“Hello,” she said, looking around at all the Christmas decorations that were left. “You decorate very nicely.”

“Oh — I think it was Dobby.”

Luna pointed at a spot above Harry’s head. “Mistletoe.”

Harry jumped out from under it.

“Good thinking. It’s often infested with nargles.”

Before Harry could ask what nargles were — or decide if he wanted to know — the door opened again. Angelina, Katie, and Alicia walked in, looking rather damp and cold.

“Well,” Angelina tossed her cloak into a corner, “we’ve replaced you.”

Harry stared at her. “Replaced me?”

“You and Fred and George. We’ve got a new Seeker.”

“Oh. Who?”

“Ginny Weasley,” said Katie.

Harry tried to remember if Ginny had ever joined him and the Weasleys in a game of Quidditch, but he could not. He knew she had been practicing in her second year, but he hadn’t heard anything since. “Is she… good?”

“Nothing on you,” Angelina, “but pretty good, actually.”

Harry was spared suffering Angelina’s burning gaze much longer by the arrival of Hermione, Ron, and Neville. Ginny was not far behind with Michael and the other boys from Ravenclaw. Within five minutes, the room was full. The earliest ones had gotten beanbags to sit on, later ones like Colin, Dennis, and their two Slytherin friends, were seated on stools in the corners.

“Okay,” Harry said, as loud as he could. He waited until he had everyone’s attention. “I thought we should just go over the things we’ve done so far, because it’s the last meeting before the holidays, and there’s no point starting anything new right before a three-week break.”

“We’re not doing anything new?” Zacharias Smith grumbled quietly, but in the silence made by the attention everyone was paying to Harry, his voice carried. “If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have come.”

Harry found himself wishing he could very much play Quidditch again, just to show up Smith.

“We’re really sorry Harry didn’t tell you,” Fred said loudly. “It would’ve been nice to get through one meeting without your company.”

A few people laughed. One of them was Cho, and as she did, Harry felt his stomach do several somersaults.

“Right,” he said, “practice in pairs. Start with the Impediment Jinx, just for ten minutes, then we
can get the cushions out and try Stunning again.”

The pairs had become rather set over the several weeks they’d been practicing. Harry found it strange to notice how much each one of the students had improved. Dennis and Hugh cast most of their jinxes with ease, now. They needed a good bit of practice, but once they put that time in, they were very successful. Amber Lais, who had begun by being bested by her little sister constantly, now could cast her own spells with the accuracy Harry expected from a seventh year. Even Neville Stunned Luna a few times, and only twice hit Dean Thomas by accident.

At the end of the hour, Harry could say he was fairly pleased. “You’re all getting really good,” he said, calling them back to order. “When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff — maybe even Patronuses.”

Parvati and Padma squealed in excitement. Katie and Alicia knocked their fists against each other’s either in celebration or congratulations.

In their usual pairs and trios, people began to leave. Many stopped to wish Harry a Happy Christmas. Atalanta and Hugh, the second-year Slytherins, stopped to thank him for teaching them.

“My Mum says it’s important to do what’s right,” Atalanta says, “and she says your family usually does that. I think she’ll be excited to hear about all of this when I get home tomorrow.”

Harry, not really knowing who Atalanta’s family was, felt unsure whether he should be proud or panicked. “Just… as long as it doesn’t get back to Umbridge.”

“Oh, no,” Atalanta said, “Mum doesn’t work in the Ministry.”

“Great.”

She and Hugh slipped out of the Room of Requirement, hand in hand. Harry had stopped watching the Marauder’s Map a few weeks ago, since as long as people left before they needed to be in bed they couldn’t get into trouble, but he knew Hugh and Atalanta were heading down to their common room in the dungeons.

Slowly, the room began to empty. Ron, Hermione and Neville left before Harry. Harry did not know if they were impatient with him for stopping to talk to everyone or if they knew he was waiting to see if Cho would stay to talk to him.

“No, you go on,” Cho said to her friend.

Harry’s heart jumped up into his throat and stayed there. He and Cho were not alone, not quite yet. He glanced to the door where Cedric still stood.

“I’ll catch up,” Cedric said to Amber and Pearl, “really. Go on without me.”

And like that, Harry was alone with Cho and Cedric. Both lingered, like each one wanted to get Harry alone and weren’t willing to cede to the other. Harry knew which one he wanted to leave, but he also wasn’t sure how long he could stand the icy air between Cho and Cedric. He might have to give up on talking to Cho tonight.

Harry decided to stall by adjusting some of the cushions they’d used for Stunning practice. He stacked them and restacked them before he felt someone’s hand on the back of his arm.

Harry turned, nearly nose-to-nose with Cedric. He was startled by the closeness, but there was nowhere to go except into the pile of cushions.
“I just wanted to ask,” Cedric said in a low voice, “where you would be for Christmas?”

So that was why Cedric wanted to speak to him alone, to discuss Order business.

“I haven’t heard from my parents,” Harry said, hoping that would be a sufficient answer.

Cedric nodded. “Okay. Well, maybe I’ll see you.”

“Okay.”

Cedric stepped away and Harry felt like he had room to breathe again. “Happy Christmas,” he said, and picked up his bag. As he passed Cho, he said in a pleasant but tired voice, “Have a Happy Christmas.”

Cho’s answer of, “You too,” was sharp and cold, but finally Cedric was gone, and Harry was alone with Cho.

He started towards her, but panicked and stopped at a bookshelf. He moved around two of the books, waiting for Cho to speak first. He snuck a glance at her and saw her fidgeting with her bag. He wondered how long the two of them could stall, but Harry had no idea how to start a conversation with Cho.

“Er —” he started, and she looked up hopefully. He was not sure whether her eyes gave him the courage to move forward or froze him like a deer caught in a torchlight. Was it possible to feel both at once? “You — your jinxes are coming along great,” he said, and he knew the words were wrong as they came out of his mouth. She seemed to know it, too, and looked a little disappointed.

“You’re a good teacher, too, you know. I’ve never been able to Stun anything before.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

There was another long moment of silence. Harry scrambled for conversation but came up empty handed.

“Are you going home for Christmas?” Cho asked. She took a step closer. Harry resisted the impulse to step back.

“I don’t know.”

Cho frowned at him. “You don’t know?”

“I mean — yes. Probably. Will you?”

“Oh, yes.”

There was another long pause. Cho looked down at her bag and adjusted the clasp on it one more time.

“Well,” she said, “Happy Christmas, Harry.”

“Wait —” he said, just as she turned.

She stopped.

Harry stepped towards her, mouth going dry as he did, but he had come this far and couldn’t quit now. “It’s just —” he stopped a half-foot from her “—you’re standing under mistletoe.”
He waited for her to step away as he had with Luna. He waited for her to move, to push him or hex him, but she did not. She looked up, saw the white berries above her, and looked back at him.

He closed the half-foot between them, and still, she did not move. His brain seemed to go numb, the sort of feeling of a limb being asleep, but it paralyzed all thought and he could not remember how to breathe. He wondered, briefly, if this was the effect of nargles, before Cho closed the space between them, and Harry forgot to think anything at all.

—— —— ——

Harry was in a bit of a daze when he returned to the common room. It was mostly empty, save for Hermione writing a lengthy letter beside the fireplace. Ron was sprawled out on the floor with a well-worn book on chess strategies. Neville was carefully pruning his Mimbulus Mimbletonia. Harry, as unfocused as he was, had enough presence of mind to pick up a cushion and keep it between him and the plant before sitting down with them.

“What kept you?” asked Ron.

Harry was not sure he wanted to tell them. He thought he could shout it out from the rooftops, and yet he was also certain he never wanted to breathe a word about it for the rest of his life.

“Are you alright, Harry?” asked Neville, setting down his small pruning shears.

Harry shrugged.

“Is it Cho?” Hermione asked. “Did she corner you after the meeting?”

The word “corner” banished Cho from his mind momentarily, and Harry remembered his conversation with Cedric. He wanted to give voice to the idea that Cedric would be staying with the Order for the holiday, but he found that his tongue did not want to work even just for those words.

So Harry only nodded.

Ron grinned. “What did she want?”

When Harry didn’t answer, Hermione asked, “Did you kiss?”


Harry looked between Ron’s excited curiosity and Hermione’s slight frown, then turned to Neville, who looked rather concerned.

Finally, he nodded.

Ron’s face seemed to split with a grin. Hermione nodded once, satisfied with this information, and returned to her letter.

“What was it like?” asked Neville.

Harry was already struggling for words to answer the simplest of questions. He was not sure how Neville expected him to answer this very complex one. “Fine.” He shrugged.

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Just fine?”

“Are you going to see her again?” Hermione asked, without looking up from her letter.
Harry’s brain, which had been as still as if it had been Stunned for the last half an hour, suddenly went into overdrive. The possibilities of seeing Cho in Hogsmeade, of walking castle corridors just the two of them, of studying together in the library, suddenly played simultaneously in his brain. He did not know what they would talk about nor what they would do, but surely there was something.

His heart dropped into his stomach as he thought that perhaps he should have asked her out after their kiss. Perhaps she had been expecting it. He might have let her down. Perhaps now she wouldn’t want to go out with him.

Hermione seemed to read all this on his face at once, despite his silence. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to ask her.”

“I wish I could ask out someone,” said Neville, who was now contentedly pruning his plant again. “Who do you want to ask?” asked Ron.

“I don’t know,” said Neville, “but it’d be nice just to have someone.”

Ron frowned at Neville, but decided that was not a conversation worth pursuing. “Who’re you writing that novel to, Hermione?” He leaned closer, trying to get a look at the parchment that was now trailing on the floor.

Hermione snatched it from his line of sight. “Viktor.”

“How many other Viktors do we know?”

Ron picked his book up again, but looked supremely unhappy. Harry, though distracted by his brain turning over thoughts of Cho in hyperspeed, noticed Ron did not turn a single page for the half hour they sat together in silence. Only Neville seemed actually content where he was, and to his credit, there was no unleashing of stinksap on anyone.

Hermione rolled up her letter and sealed it. “Good night,” she said with a yawn, and headed upstairs.

As soon as she was gone, Ron asked, “What does she see in Krum?”

Harry frowned, struggling to take his thoughts away from Cho and the future and back to Ron and the present. “I s’pose he’s older, isn’t he? He’s an International Quidditch Player….?”

“Yeah, but apart from that,” said Ron, “I mean, he’s a grouchy git, isn’t he?”

Neville picked up his potted plant and followed them upstairs. “I’ve heard he’s nice.”

“Who said that?” demanded Ron.

But now they were in the boy’s dormitory, where Seamus and Dean were asleep, so conversation ceased. Harry did not remember getting into his pajamas, but when he laid down, he was definitely wearing them. He set his glasses down on the bedside table and stared at the blurry stars outside their tower window.

Harry wondered if he should find Cho on the train tomorrow morning. Perhaps he could sit with her. Was it right to ask her out before the holiday? Perhaps they could meet even before they went
back to Hogwarts. But he didn’t even know where she lived.

Harry dreamed of walking through Hogsmeade with Cho. She was laughing, and it had to be at something Harry had said, because he felt proud. He wished he knew what it was. If it made her laugh in a dream, surely it could work in real life.

Then they weren’t in Hogsmeade, but instead on their brooms, diving around the Quidditch pitch. She was still laughing. Harry’s heart beat faster.

Harry remembered Umbridge had locked away his broom, and it vanished beneath him. He fell, fell down to the earth, but he didn’t hit the soft grass of the Quidditch pitch. Instead, he hit cold, smooth tile. His stomach slid across it, and he slipped between metal bars. The bright light of the Quidditch pitch was replaced with something dark, with a few lights glittering above.

The corridor was empty — no, Harry tasted the scent of a man. He slid forward and in the glittering light glimpsed the outline of a man, seated on the floor, chin lolling against his chest. Alive, but sleeping. Harry considered biting him, but he restrained himself. there was more important work to be done.

Harry slid forward, but then the man moved. A silvery cloak fell the floor as the man stood up, wand drawn. There was no choice. He struck, plunging his fangs into warm flesh. Blood sprang from the wounds, and Harry struck again. Bones splintered beneath the force of the blow. Venom soaked into torn skin. Harry struck again. The man yelled, but as blood drained from his body he fell backwards against the wall and fell silent.

His forehead burned. He thought his head would burst open from the pain of it.

“Harry! Harry!”

Harry opened his eyes. A cold layer of sweat covered his body. His limbs were tangled up in his sheets, and his forehead burned. The pain consumed all other sensation. Harry only briefly registered the blurred, pale face of Ron above him before he leaned over and vomited over the side of the bed. His head hurt so badly, it was as if his body wanted to reject itself just to be rid of the pain. He pressed his hands to his forehead and bit back a scream.

“He’s really ill.” Neville’s voice trembled. “Should we call someone?”

“Harry!” Ron said again.

“Your dad,” Harry said, trying to swallow down his stomach bile. “Your dad’s been attacked.”

“What?”

“Your dad!” Harry did not know how to convey the severity of the situation. “He’s been bitten. It’s serious. There was blood everywhere….”

“I’m going for help,” Neville said. Harry was dimly aware of his footsteps running out the door.

“Harry, you were dreaming,” Ron said.

“No,” Harry tried to drive the pain out of his forehead with more pressure, but it didn’t work, “it wasn’t a dream. I was there I — I did it.” At this admission, Harry vomited a second time. He felt Ron press a glass of water into his hand.

“Harry, you’re not well.” It was strange to hear so much fear in Ron’s voice, Ron, who was always
brave and supportive. “Nevile’s gone for help.”

“I’m fine.” Harry wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his pajamas. He knew he was still shaking and sweating, and his forehead threatened to burn him alive, but he was certain that his dream had been real. “There’s nothing wrong with me, it’s your dad you’ve got to worry about — we need to find out where he is — he’s bleeding like mad — I was — it was a huge snake….”

Seamus and Dean were awake, too, muttering to each other. Harry didn’t care. He only wanted to know that someone believed him and that someone would help Arthur.

“Over here, Professor,” Neville’s voice said.

A blur of red and green tartan approached Harry. “What is it, Potter? Where does it hurt?”

“It’s Ron’s dad,” Harry said desperately. “He’s been attacked by a snake and it’s serious. I saw it happen.”

“What do you mean, you saw it happen?”

“I don’t know… I was asleep and then I was there.” Slowly, the pain in his forehead was beginning to recede. It only made him more desperate to communicate the urgency of their situation.

“You mean you dreamed this?”

“No! I was having a dream at first about something completely different, something stupid, and then this interrupted it. It was real, I didn’t imagine it. Mr. Weasley was asleep on the floor and he was attacked by a gigantic snake. There was a load of blood, he collapsed. Someone’s got to find out where he is!”

Professor McGonagall stared at him like he was something horrific. She held him at arm’s length, and he thought vaguely she had good reason to — he might not be done vomiting.

“I’m not lying, and I’m not mad,” he said desperately. “I saw it happen!”

“I believe you, Potter,” she said, voice stern but gentle. “Put on your dressing-gown. We’re going to see the headmaster.”

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons and comments appreciated!
Harry grabbed his glasses from the bedside table and put them on. They slipped back down over his nose, pathway eased by the cold sweat still clinging to him. He pulled his dressing gown over his nightclothes.

“Weasley, you ought to come to,” McGonagall said.

As they left the dormitory, Neville took a step forward, as if he might follow them, but he did not move any farther than that. Seamus and Dean watched them go, faces a mixture of shock and concern.

McGonagall’s pace through the castle corridors was quick, but Harry still wanted to break into a run. Mr. Weasley was bleeding to death somewhere, and they had to get to him before he died. Harry could not also help but feel as if it was somehow his fault. In his dream, it had been him who had attacked Mr. Weasley….

It could not have taken more than a few minutes, but to Harry it seemed they had spent hours walking to Dumbledore’s office.

“Fizzing Whizbee,” said McGonagall, and the gargoyle guarding the stairs turned aside to let her pass. There were voices coming from the top of the steps, but as McGonagall knocked on the door, the conversation ceased.

The door swung open and McGonagall ushered Ron and Harry inside.

The room was dimly lit, but Harry knew it fairly well. Harry was not sure why he thought the
trinkets around Dumbledore’s office would be still at nighttime, but he was surprised to see things spinning and whirring as they did during the day. The portraits of previous headmasters, however, were sound asleep, though Harry suspected they were faking. Fawkes the phoenix was also in the room, sound asleep on the desk, probably, crimson-feathered head tucked under his wing.

Dumbledore sat at his desk, in his nightclothes, looking over a collection of papers on the table. Harry wondered briefly if it was about the school, the Ministry, or if it was notes from the Order. He did not look particularly tired, despite the bedclothes and the late hour. His piercing blue eyes were sharp as he looked up at McGonagall, then softened as they seemed to glance over Harry to Ron.

“Oh, it’s you, Minerva, and… ah.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Professor McGonagall, “Potter has had a… nightmare. He says —”

“It wasn’t a nightmare,” interrupted Harry. “It really happened, I was there.”

“Well.” She was supremely unused to being interrupted by her students, yet, sensing the gravity of the situation, she only pressed her lips together in a thin line. “Very well, Potter, you tell the Headmaster then.”

“I — Well, I was sleeping. But it wasn’t an ordinary dream. I saw it happen. Ron’s dad — Mr. Weasley — has been attacked by a giant snake.”

Dumbledore had turned his gaze from Ron to the parchment in front of him. Now he leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. Harry did not understand. He had expected Dumbledore to rush into action, to demand someone find Mr. Weasley.

“How did you see this?” he asked, without looking at Harry.

“I don’t know — inside my head I suppose?” The disrespect in his voice surprised him, as had his anger at his mother a few months earlier, but he did not regret it. He felt now as he had felt then: that he was being ignored, shunted aside, when he was certain he could be useful.

“You misunderstand me,” said Dumbledore. There was no sense of frustration or anger in his voice as he asked, “Can you remember where you were positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps standing beside the victim or looking down at the scene from above?”

Harry felt like hand was reaching up from his stomach, through his throat, and trying to snatch the words from his tongue. He did not want to say it, not to Ron or McGonagall or even to Dumbledore. It even seemed as if Dumbledore already knew.

But Harry could not lie.

“I was the snake,” he said in a quiet voice. “I saw it all from the snake’s point of view.”

“And was Arthur seriously injured?” Dumbledore asked. His eyes now were trained on Ron.

“Yes,” Harry said quickly, hoping finally someone might understand how urgent this situation was.

“Everard, Dilys,” Dumbledore said quickly, and stood with the speed Harry had been waiting for Dumbledore to act with since they had entered the room.

Two portraits sprang awake, so quickly Harry was now positive they had been faking. One was an older gentleman with waxy skin and close-cropped dark hair. The other was a witch in a corset...
with tight, white curls on her head that made her look a lot like Harry’s Aunt Dolly.

“You were listening?” Dumbledore asked.

“Naturally,” the woman said, and smoothed her hands over her dress. The man nodded.

“The man has red hair and glasses,” said Dumbledore. “Everard, you will need to raise the alarm, make sure he is found by the right people.”

The two portraits nodded and stepped out of frame. They did not, however, appear in adjacent frames as Harry was used to portraits operating in Hogwarts and in magical homes. Their frames remained empty, and the frames beside theirs remained undisturbed with former headmasters still pretending to be asleep.

“Everard and Dilys were two of Hogwarts’ most celebrated Heads.” Dumbledore moved around his desk now, to where Fawkes was resting. “Their renown is such that both have portraits hanging in other important Wizarding institutions. As they are free to move between their own portraits, they can tell us what may be happening elsewhere.”

“But Mr. Weasley could be anywhere,” said Harry. “Shouldn’t we —”

But Dumbledore ignored Harry. “Professor McGonagall, Everard and Dilys may be a few minutes. If you could draw up some extra chairs….”

As McGonagall waved her wand, three wooden chairs appeared. Harry felt reluctant to sit down, his body coursing with anxiety over the situation. He did not understand how Dumbledore could be so calm, or why Dumbledore was refusing to look at him.

Dumbledore stroked Fawkes’s head with the back of his hand. The phoenix stretched up its neck and blinked its beady, golden eyes.

“We will need,” he said quietly, “a warning.”

With a flash of flame, the phoenix disappeared.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Harry did his best to sound respectful, “how do we know where Mr. Weasley is?”

Dumbledore sat down at his desk once more and drummed his fingers against the table. He kept his eyes on the parchment in front of him and did not answer Harry’s question.

“Was it work for the Order?” Ron asked in a quiet voice.

Professor McGonagall had a sudden and unusual coughing fit. “Mr. Weasley!” She glanced at the door behind her, but there was no additional sound.

Everard came back into his frame, panting and dabbing at his glistening forehead with a handkerchief. “Dumbledore! I yelled until someone came running, said I’d heard something moving downstairs. They weren’t sure whether to believe me, but went down to check — you know there are no portraits down there to watch from. Anyway, they carried him up a few minutes later. He doesn’t look good. He’s covered in blood. I ran along to Elfrida Cragg’s portrait to get a good view as they left —”

Ron’s already pale face seemed to lose all blood, and he jerked in his chair. Harry felt his own stomach twist into a knot, but he had already seen Arthur Weasley covered in blood. This was not
news to him.

“Good,” Dumbledore said. “I take it Dilys will have seen him arrive, then.”

Only another moment passed before the silver-haired witch returned to her portrait, also looking a little winded. She sank into her chair and said, “Yes, they’ve taken him to St. Mungo’s. They carried him past under my portrait. He looks bad….”

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said, voice still calm.

Though Harry was still worried about Mr. Weasley’s safety, he felt more secure knowing that Mr. Weasley was at least in the hospital. Surely the Healers there could care for him now.

Dumbledore turned to McGonagall. “Minerva, I need you to go and wake the Weasley children.”

“Of course, Dumbledore.” Professor McGonagall got to her feet. “And what of Molly?”

“That will be a job for Fawkes when he has finished keeping a lookout for anyone approaching. But she may already know, that excellent clock of hers.”

Harry had seen the Weasley’s clock the few times he had been to the Burrow. It was not a traditional time-keeping clock, but it did track the movements of the Weasley family. He expected the hand for Mr. Weasley was pointed towards “mortal peril.” Late as it was, Mrs. Weasley should be asleep, and not aware of the change in the clock. Harry, though, had had enough restless nights of his own to know that his mother and father, too, did not sleep easily when one was out of the house. Mrs. Weasley could very well be at home panicking. The sooner she was sent a message, the better.

Dumbledore stood once more and rummaged through a drawer in a desk with clawed feet. He removed an ordinary looking black kettle, and Harry briefly wondered if Dumbledore was going to make them all a cup of tea, which seemed incongruent with the urgency of the situation. He raised his wand and tapped the kettle. Harry barely caught the whispered spell — “Portus.”

The kettle glowed blue, and Dumbledore set it on a table. He marched over to another portrait and rapped the frame of it with his wand. “Phineas.”

The man in this portrait was, without question, from the Black family. He had the same striking features that Regulus and Sirius shared, and even in his pretend sleep, looked proud and haughty.

“Phineas,” Dumbledore repeated, voice insistent, and the wizard very slowly opened his eyes.

“Did someone call?” he asked, and covered his mouth in a slow yawn.

Harry remembered Phineas being reluctant to follow orders the last time Dumbledore had called on him, after Voldemort had returned.

“I need you to visit your other portrait, Phineas. I’ve got another message.”

Phineas’s upper lip twisted in chagrin. “Must I, Dumbledore? It’s very late, and I’m quite exhausted.”

“Insubordination,” a wizard shouted. “Dereliction of duty!”

“Shall I persuade him?” asked a witch, as she raised a very thick wand.

“Very well,” Phineas sighed. “Though I don’t know who will be awake at this hour. What is the
message?"

“You are to give Regulus and whomever else is home the message that Arthur Weasley has been gravely injured, and his wife, children, and Harry Potter will be arriving at his house shortly. Do you understand?”

Phineas looked rather bored as he repeated the message, “Arthur Weasley injured, wife children, and Harry Potter coming to stay, yes, yes, very well.” And he moved out of his frame, though far more slowly than either Dilys or Everard had done.

The office door opened again, and McGonagall returned with Fred, George, and Ginny. They were still in their nightclothes, faces pale and frightened.

“How are we getting there?” Fred’s voice trembled. “Floo powder?”

“No, the Floo powder is not safe at the moment. The Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey.” Dumbledore motioned to the kettle, which had stopped glowing blue and looked just as plain as it had when Dumbledore had removed it from the desk. “We are just waiting for Phineas Nigellus to report back. I wish to be sure the coast is clear before sending you —”

Dumbledore was interrupted by a flash of golden fire in the office, and a single gilded feather drifted to the floor of the office.

“It’s Fawkes’s warning,” said Dumbledore. “She must know you’re out of your beds. Minerva, head her off. Tell her any story.”

McGonagall left the room quickly, without a word.

Phineas returned as the office door closed. He seemed to study the wood and the golden feather for a moment before announcing, “They said they’d be happy to have the children at the house once more. Though I can’t imagine why, with all the ruckus children cause.”

Dumbledore motioned the Weasleys and Harry closer to him. “Come here then, quickly, before anyone else joins us.”

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder around Dumbledore’s desk.

“You have all used a Portkey before?” he asked.

They nodded and reached their hands out, careful to get a few fingertips each on the black kettle.

“Very good. On the count of three then. One… two…”

Before Dumbledore said three, he finally made eye contact with Harry, the first moment he had actually looked at Harry since Harry had arrived in his office, or even, Harry realized, since Harry had arrived in this office several months ago with Cedric to recount his duel with Voldemort. In that moment that their eyes met, Harry’s scar burned as it had when the snake had attacked Arthur
Weasley, as it had when Voldemort had tried to kill Regulus in the graveyard, as it had when Voldemort had murdered a Muggle in the countryside. Hatred welled up inside Harry, and Harry briefly imagined how good it would feel to murder the man before him, to murder Dumbledore —

“Three.”

And something yanked at Harry’s stomach, pulling him forward, spinning with the Portkey, until all of them landed in Grimmauld Place.

“... nasty blood-traitor brats. Is it true their father’s dying?”

“Kreacher, be reasonable,” Regulus admonished, and leaned down to help Ginny to her feet.

The hand that took Harry’s shoulder, though, was far more familiar than Regulus Black’s hand. He recognized the smell before he even turned to see who was helping him stand, and he rushed straight into his father’s arms.

“Is everyone alright?” another voice asked.

Harry turned to see Remus helping George to his feet.

The room was dark, illuminated only by the dim fireplace. Three half-empty cups of tea sat on the parlor table beside an uncorked bottle of firewhiskey. Remus stood between Fred and George, dressed in day robes, which Harry thought odd for the hour of the evening. James and Regulus were in their nightclothes, though judging by the dark circles under James’s eyes, at least one of them had not been sleeping when Phineas had delivered his message. The only other person in the room was Kreacher, cowering behind Regulus and glaring at the new guests.

“Phineas said Arthur was injured,” James said. “Do you know what’s happened?”

“Ask Harry,” said Fred.

“Yeah, I want to hear this for myself,” said George.

“Let’s get everyone a seat,” James said, and waved his wand. Remus did the same, and each of them summoned two new chairs to the parlor, creating seats for Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny. Harry took the empty space on the couch beside his father.

“Kreacher, some more cups of tea would not be amiss,” said Regulus.

“How about some butterbeers?” Remus suggested. “Something sweeter might go down smoother.”

“The filthy half-blood mutation is speaking to Kreacher, asking for —”

“Kreacher,” Regulus interrupted, usually calm voice betraying the tiniest bit of exhaustion, “will you please fetch enough tea and butterbeers for everyone in the parlor? Fix yourself something, too. It is very late, and I think we all need something to keep us awake.”

Kreacher did not protest Regulus’s command, and slunk downstairs to the kitchens.

“Now, Harry,” James said, “tell us everything.”

But Harry did not want to tell them everything. Harry did not want them to think he had been the one to attack Arthur Weasley. He was worried now, more than he had been in a long time, that there was something wrong with him. Even his father’s hand on his shoulder provided no comfort.
“I had a… a kind of vision,” he finally said. He told them how he had seen Arthur Weasley in the dark hallway, and that he had seen the snake attack. He made it sound as if he had been watching from the sidelines, like a Muggle moving picture, rather than through the snake’s eyes. Ron, because he had heard this story before, gave him a shrewd look, but said nothing. Fred, George, and Ginny stared at him, as if they knew he was holding something back, or perhaps they were blaming him for what had happened to their father.

Regulus was studying Harry with the look that bordered both curious and invasive. It made Harry confused and uncomfortable, as it had when Regulus had asked him about his nightmares over the summer. He wondered if Regulus knew what was happening to him, if Regulus had already expected this.

James said nothing, but gave his shoulder an encouraging squeeze. Harry felt like his father was trying to tell him that it was alright, things were okay, but it was like whatever part of him was supposed to receive that message was shut down.

“He’ll be alright,” James said.

“How do you know?” Fred snapped. “Anything could happen — Dad could already… already…. You don’t have any idea — You’re not the one who was attacked by a giant snake.”

“This could have happened to anyone in the Order,” said Regulus, “and that it happened to your father is terrible, naturally —”

“What about you?” George snapped. “You’re not taking watches, are you? Or have you been let into meetings now?”

Harry knew enough about Regulus to know this was a severe blow to Regulus’s pride, but it did not show on Regulus’s face.

“That’s unfair,” James said. “Regulus has risked a lot for the Order and risked a lot to ensure You-Know-Who’s downfall. What has happened, happened, and he’s right — this could have been anyone in the Order. What’s important is that your father was found quickly, and he’s being treated. We’ll wait for word from Dumbledore —”

“To hell with Dumbledore,” said Fred. “It’s our dad that’s been hurt. We’ve got to go to him.”

Ginny got to her feet. “Can we borrow some cloaks?”

“You can’t go rushing off to St. Mungo’s,” Remus said.

“Course we can,” Fred said, “he’s our dad.”

“How will you explain that you knew Arthur was attacked before they even let his wife know?” James asked. “This is a very delicate situation —”

“Our dad’s been attacked and you want us to sit here?” George shouted.

“Arthur was hurt on duty for the Order. That alone is fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened. We can’t draw attention to the fact that Harry’s having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away. This could seriously damage the Order’s —”

“We don’t care about the dumb Order!” said Fred.

“It’s our dad dying we’re talking about!” George said.
“Your father knew what he was getting into,” Remus said in a voice that seemed unnervingly calm next to Fred and George’s shouting. “We all did.”

“There are things worth dying for,” James said, and Harry felt his father’s hand tighten on his shoulder. “Arthur knew the risks when he signed up for this. We all did. I know this is hard but we have got to stay put. At least until we hear from Dumbledore or your mother, alright?”

Fred and George folded their arms over their chests and leaned back into their chairs, though they continued to glower at James. Ginny hesitated, but realizing she was now the only one on her feet, sat back in her chair with a frown.

Ron had said nothing, and still said nothing, but he was looking at Harry as if Harry might have some answers for them. Harry really wished he did.

Kreacher returned with a silver tray of tea and butterbeers. Regulus and James both said polite thank yous, and with his wand, James passed butterbeers out to the children. Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, and Harry all took the drinks, but no one wanted to take a sip from them.

Harry did finally drink, if only for something to do with his hands. His mind kept drifting back to his vision, though vision wasn’t the right word, and the intense feelings he had felt. Harry tried to tell himself he was not a snake, that it was absurd to think he was in any way at fault for what had happened to Mr. Weasley. And yet….

What had happened in Dumbledore’s office? Harry glanced up at his dad, but James was looking at his pocketwatch. Harry wondered if his father was checking the time because he wanted to know how long Mr. Weasley had been in the hospital or if there was something else he was checking. Twice, Harry opened his mouth to ask where his mother was, but each time the question felt selfish in front of the Weasleys, who knew where their father was, and knew how badly he was hurt.

So they all sat in silence, faces a collection of varying anxieties, save Regulus, who looked as unperturbed as ever. His gaze seemed steady on the fireplace, but Harry had a strange feeling that Regulus was watching him very closely, and only flicked his gaze away when Harry looked at him.

Harry could not even guess how much time had passed when a fiery flash appeared in the room, leaving behind a sealed parchment envelope and a golden feather.

“That’ll be Dumbledore,” James said.

Remus, closest to the low table, reached for the envelope. “It’s Molly’s handwriting,” he said, and, passed the letter to George.

George broke open the seal and read the letter out loud. “‘Dad is still alive. I am setting out for St. Mungo’s now. Stay where you are. I will send word as soon as I can. Mum.’”

Fred snatched the letter from George and scanned it again, like there might be more information on it that George hadn’t read. Ron stared at the back of the letter as if he could read through the parchment. Ginny kept her gaze on the fire.

“It seems, then,” said Regulus, “that there is nothing to be done. We should get some rest.”

Harry thought that this insensitive statement deserved the harsh glares the Weasleys cast at Regulus as he stood and headed upstairs, but no one said anything, and no one else moved to go to bed. The sat in the parlor, all of them very awake, very still. It was the longest night Harry had ever had. Longer than the night before the first task of the Triwizard Tournament, longer than the night he had sat awake in Sirius’s Muggle flat watching James Bond films while his parents disappeared.
to some sudden emergency. The films had marked some passage of time, events playing out on a small, nearly-square screen, but now there was no way to mark the time of night. They could only sit in the dim parlor. Perhaps Harry could glance at his father’s watch, but he was too afraid to move for it, too afraid to call that attention to himself, and too afraid to even know how long they had been waiting.

Harry did occasionally cast glances at James and Remus, wondering if there was a way he could tell them about what had happened in Dumbledore’s office, about the intense anger that had coursed through him both in his dream and when he and Dumbledore had made eye contact. But he could not say anything in front of Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny, and he could not find the will to get up and leave them. No one moved, except once James got up to replace the burnt out logs on the fireplace. His wand was there on the table, but he did not use it.

It was still dark out when the clock in the hallway chimed five am, but after a few minutes, the front door opened. Everyone stood, and James checked his watch, despite what the clock had just told them.

Molly Weasley pushed the parlor door open. She seemed a little surprised to see them all standing in the parlor, but she gave them a thin smile. “He’s going to be alright. He’s going to be alright.”

Fred sank back into his chair in relief; George and Ginny rushed forward and hugged their mother. Ron’s shock finally gave way to a relieved smile, and he finished his butterbeer in one go.

“Bill’s with him now,” she said. “He’s taking the morning off work. We can all go and see him a little later.”

Remus’s smile looked as relieved as Ron’s. “I’m glad Arthur’s alright, Molly.”

“Yes — thanks to Harry.” She reached around Ginny and George and held an arm out for Harry. He obliged her the very tight hug.

“I don’t know what would have happened if it hadn’t been for you.” She kissed his forehead. “They might not have found Arthur for hours, and then it would have been too late, but thanks to you, he’s alive, and Dumbledore’s been able to think of a good cover story for Arthur being where he was. You’ve no idea the trouble he’d have been in otherwise. Poor Sturgis….”

Harry finally managed to extract himself from the hug with a mumbled excuse. He did not know how to tell Mrs. Weasley he could not help but feel this was still, in some way, his fault.

“Should we get some breakfast going?” James asked. “Come on, everyone. Let’s head downstairs.”

“Wait, Dad —” Harry started as the Weasleys began to leave the parlor.

James picked his wand up from the table, but made no movement towards the kitchens. Remus, too, waited at the door.

“I — When I had that… dream…. I was the snake. It was like — like I was in the snake, and I could smell Mr. Weasley and I — I wanted to attack him, in the dream, I wanted to do it.”

“It was just a dream, Harry,” said James.

“It wasn’t! You know it wasn’t! It happened, it was real, and I —”

“You had these dreams last year, didn’t you?” said Remus in a soft voice. “You told me the dreams
you had about Voldemort and Barty Crouch, and weren’t those also from Voldemort’s perspective.”

“I… I guess….” But Harry had not felt Voldemort’s intense murderous desires in those dreams like he had in the vision he had just had of Mr. Weasley.

“Did you tell Dumbledore?” asked James.

“Yes… he didn’t say anything. He didn’t really talk to me.”

“I’m sure he would have said something if it was worth worrying over.”

“But…” Harry tightened his hands into fists at his sides, unsure how to control the fear and anger that were warring inside him. “In Dumbledore’s office, just before we took the Portkey, where I wanted to… where I wanted to kill Dumbledore. I — I felt like the snake, and I really wanted to attack him. I think I’m going mad —”

“It’s only your dream, Harry,” said James. “Some sort of… after-effect. Like you were remembering.”

Harry shook his head, remembering only just that he had resolved to be kinder to his parents. He restrained his voice just before speaking. “It wasn’t — It was something inside me.”

“You’re worrying about nothing,” James insisted. “You’re exhausted, you’ve had a stressful night. You need to eat, and you need to sleep. Harry, you saved Mr. Weasley. You’re the reason he’s still alive. You should be prouder of that.”

Harry realized, as his father squeezed his shoulder and gave him a gentle push towards the door that he was simply talking to the wrong parent. It was very like James to try to make the best of a terrible situation. James did not like to see things reasonably, and Remus did not like making James worry.

“Where are Mum and Sirius?”

“Order business,” said James, as if that was an acceptable answer to Harry’s question, and he checked the time on his pocketwatch.

Breakfast was a noisy affair, fueled by relief of Arthur’s safety and excessive amounts of bacon. Harry found it difficult to keep pace with everyone else, but no one seemed bothered by his mellow mood.

Mrs. Weasley sent them all upstairs to nap once they’d finished eating. Harry and Ron returned to the room they’d stayed in for the month of August. The empty bed for Neville was still in there, and Harry wondered if Neville would be coming here at all over the winter holiday. He had said he would be going to his family home, but maybe things would change with Mr. Weasley in the hospital.

Ron laid down and was asleep almost immediately. Harry, however, curled himself over the cool metal headboard, intentionally making himself too uncomfortable to fall asleep. He was no longer just afraid of his dreams. He was afraid of what they might make him do.

When Ron awoke a few hours later, Harry pretended he, too, had had a refreshing nap. They went downstairs for lunch, and while they were eating, their trunks arrived from Hogwarts. They changed into Muggle clothes for the trip to St. Mungo’s, and as soon as the Prewett brothers arrived to escort them, they left.
Fabian and Gideon Prewett walked close in front of the party with Molly. They seemed to alternate which was talking comfortingly to their younger sister and which was on high alert for magical threats nearby. Remus and James brought up the rear, both with their hands in their wand pockets, as they had been when they walked Harry to the Ministry of Magic.

Harry had been to St. Mungo’s only a few times before. There were few accidents in their house that neither Lily nor Sirius could fix. The one memory of St. Mungo’s that truly stuck out to Harry, despite being clouded by time and the pain, was of the time he had wandered into an unfamiliar part of his family’s garden. He’d been only eight, and Remus was sitting him while James and Lily were out. Harry had accidentally tripped over a thick root and fallen, unawares, into a Bearded Bramble. He’d come out with a rash that Remus didn’t know how to treat.

Harry had had several accidents in his family’s garden, but he always remembered that one, because even at eight years old he had understood Remus’s intense dislike of hospitals. He had known what a brave thing it had been for Remus to bring him here for treatment.

They reached the closed fashion store front that served as the entrance to St. Mungo’s. Fabian Prewett leaned in close to the glass window and whispered the intention of their visit. The poorly dressed mannequin in the window beckoned him forward with a slight twitch of its fingers. Fabian stepped through the glass. The rest of their party followed suit.

As they passed into St. Mungo’s, the transformation from dirty Muggle street to clean hospital interior stunned Harry as it did every time. There were so many witches and wizards in here, bustling around in their bright green robes. Harry had often wondered why Sirius never became a proper Healer if he was so good at it, and he guessed, judging by the haggard looks on the Healers’ faces, that the constant urgency was why. It looked exhausting.

The large group passed under a portrait of a witch in a lime green corset with silver ringlets. Her name plate read,

Dilys Derwent
St. Mungo’s Healer 1722—1741
Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry 1741—1768

She looked down at them. As Harry looked up at her, she winked, then stepped out of her portrait, presumably off to another one of her prestigious portraits. Harry wondered if she had more portraits than the two he had already seen. It seemed very convenient to have your picture in as many places in the wizarding world as possible.

As Mrs. Weasley questioned an attendant witch about which room Arthur was in, Harry hung back with his father and Remus. He was afraid to intrude on the family and afraid of his own compliance in the attack.

Mrs. Weasley got in line to speak with the Welcome Witch behind an elderly gentleman with a trumpet to his ear, asking for his friend Broderick Bode. After being dismissed by a rather unwelcoming Welcome Witch, who told him there was no sense in talking to someone who thought they were a teapot, Mrs. Weasley approached her. The witch, at least, looked relieved that Mrs. Weasley had a perfectly reasonable request, and immediately directed her to the Dai Llewellyn Ward.

“So we can wait out here in the lobby,” Harry suggested to Mrs. Weasley, when she returned to tell them where Arthur had been moved to.

“Nonsense! Arthur will want to see you. Come along, he’s on the first floor.”
Harry followed reluctantly, James and Remus just behind him.

The Dai Llewellyn Ward was not far, but Harry thought it a little dingy. The windows were dirty, filtering in very little light. The candles in bubbles clustered in the center of the ceiling provided more light, though most of it was absorbed by the dark oak paneling around the room. There were three patients in the room in total. Mr. Weasley was sitting up in his bed on the far side, near one of the dingy windows, with a paper in his lap. Harry felt relieved to see him looking so well.

“Hello!” Arthur beamed, looking over his paper at them. “My this is a crowd.” He folded the paper and flattened it over his bed sheets. “Bill just left, Molly. Had to get to work. But he says he’ll drop in on you later.”

“How are you, Arthur?” Mrs. Weasley asked, moving to give her husband a kiss. “You look a bit peaky.”

“I feel fine,” he assured her. “If only they could take these bandages off, I’d be fit to go home.”

“Why can’t they take the bandages off?” asked Fred.

“I start bleeding like mad every time they try.” Mr. Weasley laughed. He took his wand from the table and waved it so there were five chairs in the room around his bed. James Appeared the second set of five, so everyone had a seat.

“It seems,” he continued, “there’s a rather unusual poison in the snake’s fangs that keeps wounds open.”

“Like the one Regulus got bit with last summer?” asked Ron.

Mrs. Weasley shushed him and swatted his shoulder.

“I’d bet it’s the same one,” George said under his breath.

“They’re sure they’ll find an antidote,” Mr. Weasley continued, as if they hadn’t spoken. “They say they’ve had much worse cases than mine, and in the meantime, I just have to take a Blood-Replenishing Potion every hour. That fellow over there, though,” Mr. Weasley dropped his voice and they all leaned in closer to hear him, “bitten by a werewolf. No cure at all.”

Harry glanced over at the man who looked very sick, green in the face, staring up at the ceiling with a blank expression.

“They’ve been talking to him this morning, the Healers, you know, trying to persuade him he’ll be able to live an almost normal life. I said to him — I didn’t mention any names of course —” Mr. Weasley glanced at Remus, “but I said I knew a werewolf personally, very nice man, who finds the condition quite easy to manage.”

The corner of Remus’s mouth twitched in the smallest of smiles. “And what did he say?”

“Said he’d give me another bite if I didn’t shut up.” Arthur motioned with his head to his other companion, an elderly woman. “And that woman won’t tell the Healers what bit her, which makes us all think it must have been something she was handling illegally. Whatever it was took a big chunk out of her leg. Very nasty smell when they take off the dressings.”

“Are you going to tell us what happened, Dad?” asked Ginny.

“You already know don’t you?” Mr. Weasley winked at Harry. “It’s very simple. I had a very long
day, dozed off, got sneaked up on, and bitten.”

“Is it in the Prophet, you being attacked?” asked Fred.

“Of course not. The Ministry wouldn’t want everyone to know a dirty great serpent got into —”

“Arthur,” Gideon Prewett said in a low voice.

“Got, er, me,” Mr. Weasley quickly amended.

“Where were you when it happened, Dad?” George asked with a shrewd look.

“That’s my business,” Mr. Weasley said. He was smiling, though, as he picked up the Daily Prophet. “I was just reading about Willy Widdershins’s arrest when you arrived. You know Willy turned out to be the one behind the regurgitating toilets this last summer? One of his jinxes backfired, the toilet exploded, and they found him covered from head to foot in —”

“When you say you were on duty, Dad,” Fred interrupted, “what were you doing?”

“You heard your father,” Mrs. Weasley snapped. “We are not discussing this here. Go on about Willy Widdershins, Arthur.”

“Don’t ask me how, but he actually got off on the toilet charge. I can only suppose gold changed hands.”


“George, be quiet!”

Mr. Weasley continued in a louder voice, “Anyway, this time Willy’s been caught selling biting doorknobs to Muggles. I don’t think he’ll be able to worm his way out of it because according to this article, two Muggles have lost fingers and are now in St. Mungo’s for emergency bone regrowth and memory modification. Just think of it. Muggles in St. Mungo’s. I wonder which ward they’re in.”

“Is it in a vault somewhere?” Fred asked.

“Outside, all of you!” Mrs. Weasley said, and pointed her finger to the door.

“I haven’t said anything,” Ginny protested.

“Why don’t you give us a minute,” Remus suggested with a polite smile.

“We won’t be long,” James said.

Mrs. Weasley waited with lips pressed firmly together and finger aimed sharply at the door until one by one, each of her children sulked out of the room, Harry right behind them. It could not be more obvious they were about to have a very secretive conversation.

As soon as the door closed behind the children, Fred began rummaging in his pockets.

“Looking for these?” George asked, already holding up the Extendable Ears.

Fred grinned and tucked one of the strings under the doors. “No Imperturbable Charms here.” He put the other end of the flesh colored string into his ear. He handed another piece to Harry. “Go on, take it. You saved Dad’s life. If anyone’s got the right to eavesdrop on him, it’s you.”
It was hard to feel proud of saving Mr. Weasley’s life when he already felt partially responsible. However, Harry had learned eavesdropping to be one of the most useful methods when it came to uncovering secrets.

As clear as day, Harry heard Fabian Prewett’s voice whispering, “.... they searched the whole area, but they couldn’t find the snake anywhere. It seems to have just vanished after it attacked. But You-Know-Who can’t have expected a snake to get in.”

“It was most likely a lookout,” Gideon continued. “He’s not had any luck so far. We figure he’s trying to get a clearer picture of what he’s facing before he makes his move. He’d have had a lot more time to explore if Arthur hadn’t seen him. Is it true that Harry saw it all happen?”

“Yes,” James said slowly. “It’s not the first time he’s had a dream like this, really....”

“Dumbledore seemed worried about Harry when I spoke to him this morning,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Did he really?” Even through the Extendable Ears, Harry could hear the worry in his father’s voice.

“He probably expected this,” Fabian said. “If Harry’s had this before, as you say. I doubt Harry realizes what the dream means, but if You-Know-Who possesses him, it could put us all in a lot of danger.”

“That won’t happen,” James snapped.

“James,” Remus’s voice said, quietly, and it was that quietness that stilled Harry. Remus, who so hated James to worry, was pointing out to James what Harry now realized had been obvious all along.

He had been possessed by Voldemort. He was the one who had attacked Arthur Weasley.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Harry leaned his head against the cold metal pole, staring vacantly out the window of the train car. There was nothing to see except the dark tunnel of the underground, but that was alright. His mind wasn't on scenery. He kept repeating the conversation they'd overheard in the hospital, like something too horrible to turn away from.

"If You-Know-Who possesses him, it could put us all in a lot of danger."

"That won't happen."

"James."

Each time Harry replayed Remus’s voice, he felt his stomach twist into a tighter knot. It had been so knowing, so sure of what Fabian Prewett had said. Voldemort had possessed him and he had attacked Arthur Weasley.

Harry was not entirely certain how it must have happened. He did not know how Voldemort had spirited him away from Hogwarts, turned him into a snake, then returned him to Hogwarts. But certainly if Voldemort was powerful enough to possess him at Hogwarts, then Voldemort was powerful enough to transport him from Hogwarts.

“Alright, Harry?”
Harry looked up at his father. It was not a far look anymore, certainly not standing this close to each other, crowded into the car as they were.

“You look a little pale. Did you sleep alright this morning?”

Apart from the horror of knowing Voldemort had possessed him, Harry was hurt by this secret his parents had kept from him. Surely he should have been told this, should have been made aware this might happen.

Or was that why they couldn’t tell him? Because then Voldemort might know, because Voldemort could get to him at any time, anywhere.

“You should get some sleep when we get back to the house,” Remus said, a slight frown in the corner of his mouth.

Harry nodded and tried to ignore their concerned looks, as well as the sneaking glances the Weasleys kept giving him, like they were afraid of him. Back to the house, back to headquarters. If Harry knew it, Voldemort could know it.

It struck Harry that it was no longer safe for him to be at headquarters. Every secret he overheard, every bit of information he was told became a weapon in Voldemort’s hands. This must be why his parents had kept him away from Grimmauld Place for so long, why they had kept so many secrets from him this summer.

After they had returned to Grimmauld Place, while James and Remus closed up the locks, Harry went straight upstairs. He distantly heard his dad call after him, but Harry tried very hard to shut out all sounds. He did not want to overhear anything that could give Voldemort an advantage over the Order. He did not want to think anything that might put his parents at risk.

Once Harry was back in the bedroom he and Ron shared, he began to pace. Sleeping was not an option, because if he slept, Voldemort could get to him. He could not, however, leave this room because that might put the Order at more risk.

Harry realized with a final twist of his gut that his only option was to leave Grimmauld Place. He could not stay here and put his family, the people he loved, in danger.

Quickly, Harry threw his belongings into his trunk. He had run away once before on impulse, furious with Sirius and his parents for keeping him in the dark. Then, he had gone to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry wondered if he should head there on the Knight Bus, or if perhaps he should avoid the magical world all together. Did he have enough familiarity with the Muggle world to survive and stay hidden?

As Harry closed his trunk, there was a knock on the door. Harry jumped into bed, pulled the covers to his chin, and pretended to be asleep.

The door opened with a gentle creak.

“Harry?” his father said softly.

Harry didn’t move.

James sighed. “You might be tired, but I doubt you fell asleep with your glasses on.”

Harry heard the floor creak as James moved into the room, then felt the dip in his bed as James sat next to him.
“You overheard us today, didn’t you? I know Fred and George still have some of their Ears. Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry had so many things he wanted to say, but he had too much to be afraid of. He was afraid his father might tell him something that could become Voldemort’s. He was afraid to get angry again and hurt his father’s feelings. He was afraid the feel Voldemort inside him, or to become that snake again.

“I’m sorry…. I feel so lost without your mother here. She’s so… stubborn and strong, she always knows the right decision to make. I want to do the right thing, but I don’t always know what that is. I don’t know what to do. I just want you to be okay.”

Though Harry was reluctant to give up his sleeping charade, no matter how poor it was, he couldn’t help himself: “You and mum are both terrible at encouraging speeches.”

James laughed. “Are we? Come on, sit up. Tell me what you’re feeling. Are you still mad at your mum and me? It’s okay to be mad at us. If you’re scared, that’s okay, too.”

Harry sat up and leaned against the headboard. He drew his knees up against his chest and rested his chin on them. He was scared, and he was angry, but he didn’t know how to tell his father that.

“You said my dreams were nothing to worry about,” he finally said.

“Yeah, I did.”

“You lied.”

“Harry, it’s not as simple as that.”

“My dreams are something to worry about. Voldemort’s in my head.”

“No, probably not.”

But Harry, who was so much like his father in so many ways, especially in the way that they were both terrible liars, knew his father was not being entirely honest.

“Why can’t you just tell me what’s happening to me?!”

James looked as hurt and shocked as if Harry had hit him. Harry thought that was entirely unfair. In a slow, quiet voice, James asked, “Can you wait until your mother gets back?”

“No. I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of being lied to — I’m tired of being scared — I can’t — Dad, I can’t go to sleep because what if it happens again? What if Voldemort possesses me and I hurt someone else and —”

More likely than not, it was the exhaustion of a long, sleepless night that made Harry burst into tears. But his fear and anger were still so overwhelming he could not stop sobbing, with loud, deep breaths. He was vaguely aware of his dad pulling him into a hug, and he remembered the end of the Triwizard Tournament, when he had cried into his mother’s shoulder, much like this. After so much time trying to be brave, trying to fight, there was nothing left to do but cry into his parents’ shoulders.

“You didn’t hurt Mr. Weasley, Harry. That wasn’t your fault.”

“It was — It was me, I was the snake —”
“Harry, listen to me. You’re not going mad, alright? You’re not going to lose your mind to Voldemort, either. You didn’t kill Mr. Weasley, you just happened to dream in the same place Voldemort was.”

“But I heard you — you said Voldemort could possess me, you said he could.”

“Maybe he could, but he didn’t. That isn’t what happened. We’ll make sure it never happens.”

Harry, though his tears began to slow, was not convinced. He was beginning to feel the numbness that came after an exhausting cry, like a still pond that could ripple with the slightest touch, but for now would be motionless.

“How do you know?” Harry asked.

“Because Dumbledore would have said something.”

And here they were, at the impassable topic of Dumbledore. “Was it Dumbledore who told you to keep everything a secret from me?”

James sighed. “Yes. Dumbledore asked us to.”

“Why?” When James didn’t answer, Harry said, “You still can’t tell me?” He pulled away from his father and retreated to the edge of the bed, arms folded over his chest.

James ran a hand through his hair, his anxious habit. “Can I talk to your mother first? This isn’t a decision I should make alone. We want to tell you everything, Harry, we really do. But…."

“But you won’t.”

Harry had been surprised by how strong his emotions had been lately — his sudden outburst of anger at his parents, his sudden tears just now, the intense fear that felt like it would consume him as much as his anger — but he was now surprised by the coldness in his voice. It was not angry or furious, it was resigned and accusatory.

James heard it too, and he looked as hurt as Lily had when Harry had shouted at her for lying to him.

“You need to get some rest,” James said. He took Harry’s glasses from his face and slipped them into the pocket of his shirt. “I know you’re scared, but not sleeping is worse.”

“Worse for what?”

“Your general health and well-being.”

Harry did sleep, but he did not sleep well. Tired as he was, his fear was stronger, and he only fell asleep for brief increments, no longer than twenty minutes, before waking again and staring at the ceiling. He was dimly aware of movement in the house. Ron came in to tell him dinner was ready, his father and Remus each came in to check on him, and occasionally he heard the portraits screeching, announcing someone’s arrival.

The brief moments Harry did get sleep, he dreamed.

He dreamed of a dark corridor, a long hallway, lit with torches, and a door — a door he could not open. Like the door to Grimmauld Place, it had no handle, no door knob. So how could he open it?
He thought if his scar would stop prickling maybe he could come up with a solution.

He woke up to a knock at the door. It was soft, perhaps Ron or his father coming to bother him again. He laid very still and kept his breathing even, hoping whoever it was would go away. They did not.

The door creaked open, and he heard footsteps pad across the floorboards. He thought perhaps it was Ron going to bed. Then he felt the weight on his mattress as someone sat down in his bed, and he knew it was one of his parents. He wasn’t really interested in a repeat conversation like he’d had with his father, one with excuses and no answers.

A gentle hand brushed his bangs from his forehead, and there was a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Oh, Harry.”

Lily’s voice was barely a whisper. She must have thought he was truly sleeping, and trying not to wake him. He wondered how long she’d been back, where she’d been, what she’d been doing. Did she know about his dream? Did she know what it meant? But Harry knew even if he asked her, she wouldn’t give him a straight answer.

“Is he sleeping?” he heard his father say, just as softly as Lily, though farther away.

“Seems so.”

“That’s good.” And James truly didn’t sound worried. Small as it was, it gave Harry some comfort, that at the very least, his parents thought that sleeping was safe.

“Sirius wants you to look over the report before he seals it.”

“I’ll be right there,” Lily said. She kissed Harry one more time and said, “I’m so glad you’re home.”

Grimmauld Place wasn’t home, but Harry thought he knew what she meant. He was with family.

And that felt good, it really did. For the first time in Harry’s schooling, Hogwarts was positively miserable, and he was so happy to be with his parents again. Or at least, he wanted to be happy. But it was so hard to be happy when there was so much to worry about.

The door creaked, but didn’t latch close. His mother’s voice still carried into the room.

“What do we do now?”

“We wait for word from Dumbledore,” James said.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“We should be glad it did. It saved Arthur’s life.”

“But now….”

But his parents’ voices trailed off as they moved down the hallway.

Harry rubbed his hands over his eyes, trying to press down the anger that was welling up inside him. They’d promised no more secrets, but here they were, whispering in hallways about him. None of this was fair; none of this was how his parents had raised him.
He sat up and fumbled for his glasses on the bedside table, but they weren’t there. He tried to remember where he had put them, but he was so tired, he couldn’t even remember taking them off when he’d gotten into bed.

The door creaked open again, and he heard an unimpressed snort.

“I told you he wasn’t really sleeping.”

The blurry, pale, red-haired shape at the door did not look nor sound like his mother, but Harry was not used to Ginny barging in on him like this, and it took him a minute to realize it was her. It took another moment to see Ron behind her, though he was easier to recognize because he was far taller than Fred or George. There was a third figure behind Ron, about as tall, but with broader shoulders. Harry had to squint to recognize Cedric.

“What are you all doing here?”

“Cedric wanted to talk to you,” Ginny said. “He said your mum said you were sleeping. I told him you were just avoiding everyone and were absolutely awake.”

“I just wanted to know how you’re doing,” Cedric asked.

“I’m fine,” Harry said, now searching his bed for his glasses. “When did you get here?”

“Last night. Fred and George told me what had happened at school, and what you overheard at the hospital. They said you’d been avoiding everyone.”

Harry frowned and paused his search for his glasses. “I haven’t been avoiding anyone — you’ve all been avoiding me.”

“We’ve wanted to talk to you!” said Ginny. “But seeing as you’ve been hiding ever since we got back —”

“I didn’t want anyone to talk to me!”

Ginny snorted. “Well that was rather stupid of you, seeing as you don’t know anyone but me who’s been possessed by You-Know-Who, and I can tell you exactly how it feels.”

It felt like everything in the room went very still very quickly. Even the large storm of emotions clashing inside of Harry ceased for a moment.

“I forgot,” he said.

“Lucky you.” She pushed her way into the room and sat across from him, on Ron’s bed. Ron and Cedric followed.

“I’m sorry.” Harry looked down at the floor. “Do you think I’m being possessed then?”

“Can you remember everything you’ve been doing? Are there big blank gaps where you don’t know what you’ve been up to?”

“... No.”

“Then You-Know-Who hasn’t ever possessed you. When he did it to me,” Ginny paused. Harry couldn’t see the details on her face, but he knew her well enough to guess her stubborn expression as she forced down her more painful emotions, “I couldn’t remember what I’d been doing for hours at a time. I’d find myself somewhere and not know how I got there.”
“But my dream….” Harry tried helplessly.

“You had those dreams last year,” said Ron. “Those ones about knowing what You-Know-Who was doing.”

“This was different! I was the snake. What if I was somehow transported to London —”

“You didn’t leave your bed, mate. I saw you thrashing about in your sleep for a good minute before we could wake you up. And Neville was trying longer before he woke me up to help.”

Harry ran his hands through his hair. “So… I’m not…. The weapon Voldemort’s after… it isn’t me?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” said Cedric. “Fred and George said Mr. Weasley was on duty when he was attacked. We thought the weapon… we thought he might be guarding it. If you can remember anything from your dream that would tell us where the weapon was, it might help us figure out what it is.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know… It was a dark hallway, with torches.”

“That narrows it down,” Ginny said.

“I was a snake in the dream, so my vision was a little low,” Harry snapped at her.

“If you think of anything,” Cedric said quickly, “that might help us know where they’re hiding the weapon or what it is, let us know.”

“Yeah.” Harry wasn’t too fond of playing the dream over and over again in his memory, but it might be worth it. “Have you seen my glasses anywhere?”

“Oh,” Ron sounded like he was on the verge of laughter, “your dad has them.”

“Where?”

“You’ll have to ask him,” and Harry could hear the smile in Ginny’s voice. He couldn’t imagine what Ron and Ginny thought was so funny.

They went downstairs for breakfast, Harry’s first proper meal in over a day. The kitchen was not particularly crowded, but it was suddenly very loud when Harry walked in.

Lily and Sirius were there, and both shouted very loudly when they saw Harry. He was pulled into a series of hugs, and there was so much laughing, just to see each other again. Harry, too, was swept up in the laughter. He was still angry and frustrated with his parents, but he felt better knowing he hadn’t been possessed by Voldemort. He was also glad to know his mother was home safe from wherever she had been, and he was glad to see Sirius, who he hadn’t seen since their trip into Hogsmeade.

At one point, Sirius pulled him out of a hug and held him at arm’s length, two hands gripping tight on his shoulders, looking him over.

“You doing alright?” Sirius asked.

Harry squinted up at him, trying to determine an expression that might match the suddenly serious tone in his voice.

“Yeah, I am,” Harry said. “Where are my glasses?”
“Your dad’s got them.” Sirius let Harry go and sat down at the dining room table. “Lily, where did James get off to?”

“He’s in the attic with Remus and Regulus.” She set plates of food down on the table for everyone. “They’re moving furniture, I think. Regulus wanted to get at some trunks hidden further back. James was also looking for Christmas decorations.”

“I’d be happy to help,” said Cedric.

“Just sit and eat breakfast,” Lily said. “Once we get decorations down, we can all help.”

“I can’t help until I can see again,” Harry complained.

“We’ll get you your glasses back,” Lily promised with a laugh. “Have you seen Fred and George this morning? Molly wanted to make sure they were up before noon.”

“Where’s Mum?” Ron asked.

“With your dad. She’ll be back soon.”

Fred and George did make their way down to breakfast, around the time James, Remus, and Regulus came downstairs with boxes of Christmas decorations. Sirius and James spent a large part of the morning transfiguring all the green decorations to red, and changing silver accents to gold. If Regulus found this offensive, he said nothing. In fact, Harry thought he was looking at most of the decorations like he was seeing them for the first time. It did not seem polite to ask Regulus and Sirius if their family ever decorated for Christmas, though.

James did return Harry’s glasses to him, but it was so dramatic, Harry wondered if Sirius had had a hand in it. James had wrapped them in bright Christmas wrapping paper and presented them to Harry as the first gift of the season. It was embarrassing to have to open up his own glasses like a Christmas gift, but everyone else’s laughter was so infectious, Harry could not help but enjoy himself.

Over the next few days, the entire household went to town decorating. It was far more rewarding than the summer cleaning had been. They put an enormous Christmas tree in front of the tarnished family tree tapestry, hung streamers from chandeliers, and fairy lights in every room. Everyone helped, even Kreacher and Regulus. It was the most housework Harry had ever seen Regulus do.

The most common topic of conversation at mealtimes was the D.A. Molly Weasley had initially expressed her displeasure at the idea, but she was overruled by James, Lily, Remus, Sirius, and Regulus, who all thought the D.A. important in these times. Then there were Amos and Fiona Diggory, who were just happy to see that Cedric was interested in something again. Of course, they warned him not to get caught, and Mrs. Weasley did the same to her children James and Sirius seemed certain the D.A. could not be caught. They made Ron and Harry promise to let Neville and Hermione know how impressed they were with the Room of Requirement and the Protean Charm Hermione had created on a galleon to let everyone know the time and date of the meetings.

With all the bustle, Harry could not find a moment to speak to his parents alone. Though he was no longer worried about being possessed by Voldemort, he was still worried about his dream and how powerful it had been. He did not want to experience that sensation of hatred and loathing again.

It wasn’t until, after an enormous Christmas Eve feast, as everyone saw themselves to bed and Remus walked Tonks to the door, that Harry managed to stop his parents in the hallway.

“You said you’d tell me what my dream meant,” he said. “You’d tell me what’s happening to me.”
James and Lily exchanged a glance. Harry knew he had caught them off guard, but he could not wait another minute. He would not give them time to think up a suitable lie.

“We’ve told you what happened the night Voldemort attacked,” James finally said.

“Your scar,” Lily said, “is a mark of that connection between you. That’s why it hurts, because you and Voldemort are connected. That’s why you’re having those visions.”

“But I was a snake….”

“If Voldemort was in the snake,” said James, “then you could be too, because you’re connected to Voldemort.”

Lily put a hand on his cheek, then pulled him into a hug. It was strange to be as tall as her, to lean his head against her shoulder like they were equal.

“We promise that’s all we know,” she said. “If Dumbledore knows anything else… he hasn’t told us.”

It didn’t answer all of Harry’s questions, but he did believe them. His parents may have lied to him before, but they were such terrible liars that he felt sure there was no way they were lying to him now. It was only partially comforting, because now that meant there was an insufficient explanation for his dream and the hatred he had felt towards Dumbledore in Dumbledore’s office.

At the least, his parents were being honest with him again.

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Christmas morning dawned bleak and gray. That should have been enough of a warning to Harry.

The presents, though, were good. Sirius and Remus got him another set of Defense Against the Dark Arts books, probably picked out in light of their conversation about Dumbledore’s Army. James and Lily gave him a new set of quills, far nicer than anything Harry had ever seen in Diagon Alley, and he wondered where they came from. He also wondered why that was the only gift: he was used to his parents buying him an expensive gift, but also including something of sentimental value. There was nothing else from them, though. Neville sent Harry a pocket-sized glass terrarium, along with a letter that assured Harry all the plants were Muggle-plants. Hermione sent a day planner, which was at least a practical gift, considering Harry’s chaotic schedule. Mrs. Weasley gave him a new scarf, as she did nearly every Christmas. Regulus gave him a new bookbag with hidden pockets. Harry wondered if Regulus had sent someone to get it, or if it had been found in the house somewhere. Harry resolved to use it with caution. Tonks sent a miniature Firebolt, which was nice, but made him miss his real Firebolt. Ron gave Harry a large box of Every-Flavor Beans, and lastly, Cedric gave Harry a small bottle of scented oil. There was an attached note that said the scent was supposed to be relaxing before bed, and was entirely non-magical, so it shouldn’t have the side-effects Sleeping Draught did. It was surprisingly thoughtful, and Harry wondered if Cedric was giving it to him because Cedric already used it himself.

But as Harry began to gather up the wrappings to bin, and tossing Every-Flavor Beans back and forth with Ron, Fred and George came in and sat down on Ron’s trunk.

“Best not head downstairs yet,” Fred said. “Mum’s crying again.”

“Percy sent his gift back unopened,” said George. “Git.”

“No note,” Fred added. “Didn’t even ask after Dad.”
“We tried to tell her Percy’s no more than a pile of rat droppings,” George sighed.

“I take it that didn’t work,” Harry said.

“Nah. Lupin’s at it now. He’s better at that stuff anyway.”

The boys stayed upstairs for another hour, making a game of summoning trash from the bin and launching it at each other. Loser took a handful of Every-Flavor Beans. Ginny joined them; Cedric did not.

Eventually, Fred used the Extendable Ears to determine it was safe to go downstairs. They all enjoyed a Christmas breakfast, with everyone home for the holiday, including the Diggorys, who were usually working at the Ministry, and Mundungus Fletcher, who probably had nowhere else to be. Tonks was there, too. Though she had missed Christmas Eve to be with her parents, she arrived in her usually loud and clumsy fashion for breakfast. The Prewett brothers came too, though they didn’t stay long. They left with Mrs. Weasley and the Weasley children to visit Mr. Weasley in the hospital, as he was still unable to come home for the holiday.

Once the Weasleys had left, Tonks had returned to her family, and Mundungus had left as well, it nearly felt like a regular Potter family Christmas, except Cedric and his parents were there, too. It wasn’t as awkward as Harry had thought it would be.

Any friction between Amos Diggory and Sirius, James, and Remus had been worn smooth by their shared battles. The friction between Sirius and Regulus, however, was as strong as ever, but that was normal to Harry.

Harry noticed, too, a different atmosphere between Fiona and Cedric. During the summer, Cedric had seemed to hold his mother at arm’s length, but now he was smiling and talking with her as they sat down in the parlor, and it didn’t look forced to Harry. Harry wished he could repair his relationship with his parents that easily. It still hurt that they had lied to him, and it still hurt that they had to keep secrets from him.

Harry sat down on the floor beside the tree and opened up one of the books Remus and Sirius had bought for him. He was looking through the table of contents, trying to decide if any of it would be useful for the D.A., when Lily came and sat down next to him. She had a glass of wine in her hand, something Regulus had opened up to celebrate the holiday.

“Merry Christmas,” she said. “Want one?” She held the wine glass out to Harry.

Harry frowned. “What?”

“You’re the only not of age,” she said, and gestured to where Cedric was sitting with his mother and Remus, each with a wine glass in their hand. Regulus stood off to the side with Mr. Diggory; James and Sirius had disappeared together somewhere.

“So you’re saying I can have some if I want it?”

Lily shrugged. “Try it. You probably won’t like it.”

Harry took the wine glass from his mother and took a sip. It was bitter and sour all at once. It made his mouth go dry and he coughed before he’d even finished it.

“No thanks,” he said, wishing for a glass of water to rinse his mouth out.

She laughed. “I didn’t think so. What’s this book then?” She lifted the cover. “Is it one of the ones
Remus and Sirius —

She broke off suddenly, and Harry didn’t know why, until she grabbed his hand. Harry tried to pull it away, but it was too late. She’d already seen the words carved into his skin.

Her voice was a quiet whisper. “Harry, what is this?”

“Mum, it’s nothing.”

“Did you do this?”

“No — it — Really, it isn’t anything.”

“What does it mean, ‘I must not tell lies’?”

“It doesn’t mean anything. Just leave it alone.”

“Harry.”

Harry knew exactly what was going to happen the minute he told her the truth, but he saw no way to avoid it.

“It… It’s from Umbridge’s detentions.”

Lily stared at Harry for a moment. He wondered if she was searching for a lie, or if she was waiting for him to say it was all a joke. Perhaps she was only trying to control her temper.

She stood up and stalked out of the room.

“Is everything alright, Lily?” asked Remus as she passed, but she ignored him.

Everyone stared after her, conversations abruptly halted. They all heard James say from the hallway, “Lily, are you going somewhere?”

“I’m going to the Ministry.”

“What? Lils, it’s Christmas. No one’s there.”

“Then I’m going to Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts? Why? What’s happened? Lily, talk to me before you go barging off somewhere —”

Finally, Lily began shouting. “It’s that foul Umbridge woman! I’m not letting her stay in that school another minute! I don’t care if it’s Christmas. I don’t care if it’s the Ministry. I don’t care what it takes. She is not going to spend another minute near Harry!”

Then the portraits began shouting. Remus and Regulus left the parlor to quiet the house.

Cedric gave Harry a questioning look, but Harry avoided his eyes and stared at the book in his lap.

He should have been more careful. He shouldn’t have let his mother see. There was nothing for her to do, and he was only worrying her over nothing now. This, he thought, was what Cedric had meant when he had told Harry he was lying about his nightmares.

The portraits were quiet, and Lily was no longer shouting. Harry had not been able to hear anything over the screaming portraits, so he did not know if Lily had left or if James had stopped her. There
were footsteps in the hallway, and James appeared in the parlor door. His face was grim.

“Harry, can we talk in the sitting room, please?”

It was the sort of voice James used when Harry was in trouble. Harry did not know if he was in trouble now, but he was sure his parents were very upset. This was not how he wanted his Christmas Day to go.

But Harry got up and followed his father into the small room at the end of the hall. He didn’t know what the difference between a sitting room and a parlor was. Sirius did, but refused to explain it. Harry had never thought to ask Regulus.

They seemed fairly similar, as it was. When Harry walked into the sitting room, Remus, Sirius, and Lily were already there. Remus stood at the window, clearly listening, but he did not meet anyone’s eyes. Sirius sat at a desk, twisting a quill between his fingers. Lily was on the settee, hands folded tightly together. She looked more anxious than Harry could ever remember seeing her. James closed the door behind Harry and gestured for Harry to take a seat, but did not take one himself.

“Harry,” Lily said, and Harry was sure he saw tears in the corners of her eyes, “can you just tell us… what happened.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, even though he knew exactly what they meant.

“Your mother,” said James, “has just told us that Umbridge has had words carved into the back of your hand. Is that true?”

Harry searched for a suitable lie, but there was no explanation for the scars on the back of his hand apart from the truth. “It’s… sort of true.”

Sirius swore and the quill he’d been fidgeting with snapped between his fingers.

“Can you tell us what is true?” Remus asked, but he kept his gaze out the window.

So Harry told them. He told them how he’d told Umbridge about Voldemort in class, how he’d lost his temper, and gotten a detention. He thought they’d be upset with him for that, but they didn’t react. Then he told them about the detention and Umbridge’s quill. Sirius broke another feather stem, two tears fell from Lily’s eyes, and James ran his hand through his hair. Remus kept a steady gaze out the window.

Once Harry was done, James asked, “Did you tell anyone about this?”

“Ron and Hermione,” Harry admitted. “And Professor McGonagall.”

“And she did nothing?” Lily pressed her lips into a thin line.

“I think she tried, but—”

“She didn’t even tell us!”

“What would you have done?” Remus leaned his forehead against the window. “Marched down to the Ministry and made a scene? Complained to Dumbledore only for him to tell you his hands were tied because of the Ministry?”

“At the very least, we could have pulled Harry out of Hogwarts,” James said.
“You’re not going back,” Lily said to Harry. “Either she leaves Hogwarts, or you stay here. I’m not letting her near you again.”

Four months ago, Harry had been upset at the possibility of never returning to Hogwarts. It had never been discussed, though, because his parents had resolved the issue without ever talking to him about it.

Now, it didn’t bother him as much. Hogwarts was truly miserable this year. He couldn’t play Quidditch, his Defense Against the Dark Arts class was terrible, he was drowning under a mountain of homework, and it felt like he had detention with Umbridge every other week.

The only thing Harry looked forward to at Hogwarts was D.A. meetings. It was the one thing he could do that felt like he was fighting back.

“Isn’t staying here like giving in?” Harry asked. “If you pull me out of school…. It’s like she won. She wants me to leave.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Lily. “What matters is that you’re safe and out of her reach. I can’t believe this is happening at Hogwarts. We put all this work into trying to make you safe, sending you to Hogwarts where you’ll be safe from Voldemort, only for this to happen. No. I can’t allow this.”

“But don’t I need my O.W.L.s? And I… I care about the D.A. I want to keep teaching them.”

“None of that is worth suffering under Umbridge,” said James. “She’s torturing you — that’s entirely unacceptable.”

“Fifth year is an important year,” Remus said quietly.

“You want him to go back?” Lily shouted. Harry was not sure he had ever seen his parents shout at Remus before. “You — Remus, how — how could you want him to go back to where Umbridge is, where she physically hurts him?”

“I don’t want that,” said Remus, He still did not look at Lily. “but I know a thing or two about painful problems you can’t fix. Sometimes the only thing we can do is suffer through them.”

“This isn’t a condition or a curse or anything like that. This is a singular person who is hurting Harry, and I will not put him in a place to be hurt further.”

“What if I promise not to get into detention again?” Harry asked. “I could avoid Umbridge entirely, if I tried hard enough. I can keep my head down in her classroom. Everything.”

“This isn’t about you getting into trouble,” said James. “This isn’t about keeping your head down or placating Umbridge so she stops torturing you. That’s only treating the symptoms. We’re treating the problem and removing you from her reach.”

Lily was crying now, but they were angry tears. Her face was red, and Harry had a feeling if Umbridge appeared suddenly, Lily would murder her without question. Harry had never seen his mother like this before. Not even when a basilisk had nearly killed Harry, nor when Voldemort had kidnapped him. Harry did not think of Umbridge as worse than Voldemort, but his parents seemed to see something more sinister in this situation than Harry understood.

“Sirius, you’ve been awfully quiet,” said Remus. “What do you think?”

Sirius leaned against the armrest of his chair and put his head in his hand. “I think we should trust
Lily turned to face him so fast, her red hair spread out like a fan for just a moment. “What?”

“If Harry thinks he can keep himself out of detention, out of Umbridge’s way, and if Harry wants to go back, let him.”

“Sirius,” James said, in a tender voice that was usually reserved for Remus.

“The minute anything goes wrong,” Sirius said, “the minute he gets a detention, or something happens, he can tell us, and then we’ll take him out of Hogwarts.”

“How could you?” Lily asked. “How could you, of all people, say that?”

“Because Harry has a way out. He has us. As long as Harry doesn’t feel trapped at Hogwarts, as long as he knows he can come home, I think he should get to choose what he wants.”

“No,” Lily said. “No, I can’t believe I’m hearing this. This — just get out. Sirius, Remus, just leave —”

“Lily,” James tried, but she was not to be interrupted now.

“No! They’re not Harry’s parents. This isn’t their decision to make. I can’t believe they would choose anything other than Harry’s safety.”

“Because sometimes parents can’t protect their children,” said Remus. “Sometimes, there are problems Harry has to face that we — you can’t do anything about.”

“This isn’t one of those times,” said Lily. “There is something James and I can do, and that is take him out of Hogwarts.”

“My biggest fear,” said Sirius in a quiet voice, “when I was growing up in this house, was that there was no way out of it. I could not imagine a world beyond this. Even Hogwarts didn’t fix that — I had to come home every summer. And after graduation, I did not think I would have anywhere else to go. But when I found a place that was safe, a place that would protect me, a place I knew I could escape to, it meant that nothing else in this house mattered. If Harry wants to stay at Hogwarts, I think he should be given the choice, because he always has a place he can come back to.”

Lily’s lower lip trembled, and she pressed her mouth together to hide it. She seemed too afraid to speak, for fear she would begin sobbing.

James had his eyes on the floor, and in a very quiet voice said, “Is that really enough? Is that enough when we can do more?”

When Sirius said nothing, Remus asked, “Harry, what do you think?”

Harry took a moment to think about his answer. He appreciated, so much, that his parents wanted to protect him. Though he found it stifling when they tried to keep secrets from him, this sort of protection, this fierce and unwavering defense in the face of something horrible, made Harry feel loved, as much as making breakfast with his Mum or playing Quidditch with his Dad did. He wished there was a way he could say that, but he didn’t know the words for it.

“I hate Umbridge,” Harry said, “I really do. But… I’ve worked so hard for my O.W.L.s, and the D.A. is really important to me. And….” And Cho was at Hogwarts, and he had only just kissed her,
but he couldn’t say that. “I’d really like to finish this year at Hogwarts, and if — if Umbridge stays longer than that, then fine, I won’t go back next year. But at least let me finish this one.”

“I can’t send you back to Hogwarts,” said Lily, “when I know that foul woman is there, when I can’t even talk to you because the Ministry is reading our letters and watching the Floo.”

“If that’s your only reservation,” said Sirius, “we do have one last Christmas gift for Harry.”

“The gift’s a little moot if he’s not going back to school,” said James.

Lily pressed her hands to her face. She took a very deep breath, and wiped her tears away. “Harry… can you promise me you won’t let her hurt you? That you won’t get detentions, and if you do, you just don’t do them? Or you’ll tell us right away, and we’ll bring you home?”

“Okay,” said Harry.

Lily bit down on her lip, looking very much like she might cry again. But she didn’t. She stood up and left the room.

“She’s going to keep having this argument,” said Remus. “It’s only going to get worse the closer we get to the end of the holidays.”

“I know,” James said. “I don’t like this either.” He sighed and waved his wand. A fairly small package, about the size of a small book, appeared on the table. “This is your last Christmas present, from all of us, really, but mostly me and Sirius, seeing as we’re the ones that made it.”

“ Took us a while to find it,” said Sirius. He picked up the package and handed it to Harry. “But if you’re going back to Hogwarts, you should get a good use out of it.”

Harry frowned and tore back the wrapping. It was only a small, handheld mirror. It was old, dirty and faded on the edges, and seemed to do nothing but show his reflection back at him. But he knew enough about magic to know appearances meant very little.

“It’s a two-way mirror,” James said. “If you call for one of us in your mirror, we’ll be able to see you and talk to you through ours.”

Sirius pulled an identical handheld mirror from his pocket. “One of us will always keep this one on us. You can talk to us whenever you need to, no worrying about coded letters or Umbridge or the Ministry.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, entirely unable to express the gratitude that overwhelmed him. His family missed talking to him as much as he missed talking to them. They worried about him, they wanted him safe — It was, possibly, the best Christmas present he’d ever received from his family, maybe even better than the Firebolt.
Over the next two weeks of their holiday, Harry changed his mind on whether or not he wanted to go back to Hogwarts as often as Lily changed her mind one whether or not she wanted to let him. The only reason Harry truly wanted to go back to school was out of spite. He was angry with Umbridge, did not want her to think she’d forced him to leave school, and wanted to continue running the D.A. right under her nose. His O.W.L.s were sort of important to him, but Harry wasn’t sure he would truly need them in the fight against Voldemort, and shouldn’t that take priority? Lily was very loud about her reasons for not wanting Harry to go back to Hogwarts. She did not want to put him in a place where he was not just in danger, but being actively targeted by a teacher. She was furious about Umbridge, and there were several afternoons during those two weeks where James and Lily were down at the Ministry filing complaints against Umbridge. Neither James nor Lily seemed optimistic their complaints would be listened to.

“Lately, we have about as much weight down there as Remus does,” James joked once.

Lily, however, had mentioned she was worried about what would happen to Harry if he didn’t get his O.W.L.s, and she fully supported Harry’s desire to continue the D.A.

One evening, Harry went down to the kitchen for water and found Lily, James, Remus, and Sirius engaged in a whispered conversation that stopped abruptly when Harry entered. Harry tried very hard not to bristle at the idea that his parents were keeping secrets from him. He wanted to trust them, but it wasn’t easy after everything that had happened.

“Everything alright, Harry?” Remus asked in a voice Harry knew was truthfully asking after nightmares.

“Just thirsty,” Harry said.

Lily wiped her cheeks with her hands. “Harry, are you sure you want to go back to Hogwarts?”

Harry could not honestly answer yes. He felt like he wasn’t sure of anything anymore, not really. He wanted to blame his parents for keeping secrets from him, but this holiday had made him realize his parents didn’t know everything, either. All of them were just trying to make the best decisions with the incomplete information they had.
“I’m not afraid of Umbridge,” Harry said, “if that’s what you mean. I hate her, but I’m not afraid of her.”

“We just want you to be safe,” she said.

“I’m not safe anywhere, though, right?” It was something Harry had overheard his parents say back in August, but something that had stuck with him ever since. “It’s dangerous here at the Order. It’s dangerous at home. It’s dangerous at school.” He knew these were probably not the comforting words his mother and father wanted to hear, but they were true. “At least at school I’m kind of doing something. I’m not helpful here.”

James ran his hand through his hair and looked helplessly at Lily. “Dumbledore did say he wanted him back at school.”

“I don’t care what Dumbledore thinks,” Lily snapped. “He did nothing about Umbridge. I don’t care what he has to say about Harry.”

“Harry goes back to school in two days.” Remus stirred his tea with a spoon. The full moon had come shortly after New Year’s, and the stress of it was still showing in the tight corners of Remus’s mouth. It seemed even with the Wolfsbane Potion, the stress of the war was taking its toll on his transformations. “You’ll need to come to a decision very soon.”

Sirius leaned back in his chair and stretched. “How about I go back with Harry? He doesn’t need Hedwig now that he’s got the mirror, right? I’ll just go as Harry’s companion. Umbridge won’t get near him with Padfoot sitting beside him in class every day.”

James looked upward, like he was searching the ceiling for help or sympathy. Harry felt similarly. Harry tried to picture attending Hogwarts with Sirius on his heels all day, every day. He thought about trying to talk to Cho knowing Sirius was sitting right beside him. He tried to picture Trelawney’s face when he went to class with an actual Grim on his heels. He imagined getting into detention because Sirius decided to mark Umbridge’s shoes as his territory.

Lily opened her mouth to snap at Sirius, but she quickly closed it. It was not an easy thing to do to tell Sirius to behave more seriously. It only made everything funnier.

“Let’s make a decision in the morning, so Harry at least has the day to pack.” James rubbed his eyes, shoving his glasses up onto his forehead. “But whatever we decide in the morning, we stick to it.”

“Yes, fine,” Lily agreed wearily.

Harry did not think another night of sleep would give Lily any added peace of mind about her decision if two weeks had not. But he supposed he wouldn’t mind an extra night to decide if he really wanted to return to Hogwarts. Knowing he had the mirror made it easier to want to go. He could talk to his parents at any time, and if things truly did get bad, he could ask his parents to take him away. Sirius had been right; having a way out definitely made things easier to bear.

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At breakfast, Lily agreed that Harry could return to Hogwarts. But she made him swear, as she had each time she had agreed to let him go, that he would do his best to stay out of Umbridge’s way, and if he did get into trouble with Umbridge, he was to let her know immediately, and she would have him taken from school, and he was supposed to use the mirror every night to let his parents know he was safe ——
“Every night? I usually only write letters once a week.”

“Every other night, then,” Lily said, massaging her forehead as if it might relieve some of her worry. “Go on upstairs and pack before I change my mind.”

Harry took the stairs two at a time. He wasn’t exactly excited to go back to Hogwarts — he had his reservations — but he felt relieved knowing his parents trusted him to return to Hogwarts. It helped, too, that Ron was excited Harry was going back. It reminded Harry of all the good things that were waiting for him: his friends, the D.A., Cho —

Harry had just closed his trunk when there was a knock at the door.

“Harry, can you come down to the kitchen?” James cracked the door open and poked his head in. “Professor Snape is downstairs to see you.”

Harry frowned, taking a moment to make sense of what his dad was asking of him. “What?”

“Professor Snape, kitchen, I know, a bit shocking,” James grinned, “but he’s in a hurry, so if you’re not busy right now.…”

“Er — are you joking?”

James laughed. “Sounds like one, isn’t it? Don’t think even Sirius would think of something this absurd, though. Come on.”

Reluctantly, Harry followed his dad down into the kitchens where, indeed, Snape was sitting. Sirius sat opposite him, glaring daggers. Remus and Lily were there too, seated nearby, looking far more polite than Sirius.

“How he is,” James said, a plain sort of announcement.

Snape’s cold, dark eyes focused on Harry and he gestured at the empty seat beside Sirius. “Do sit down, Potter.”

Harry looked to his dad for help, but James was already taking a seat next to Lily.

“You know,” Sirius said folding his arms over his chest, “I think I’d prefer it if you didn’t give orders here, Snape. It’s my house, you see.”

Snape pressed his lips together tightly, and Harry had to stifle a laugh as Remus openly rolled his eyes. Sirius had never before tried to claim ownership over the house, but if it meant arguing with Snape, Sirius would take every opportunity.

“I was supposed to see you alone, Potter,” Snape said, “but Black —”

“Sirius and Remus are as good as James and I,” Lily interrupted. Harry thought he saw an apology in her eyes as she looked at Remus and Sirius. “Whatever we can hear, they can hear.”

Snape did not reply to Lily, and in fact made no indication he had heard her. He did not look at her or James, and instead focused on Harry.

“Dumbledore has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term.”

Harry frowned. “Study what?”
“Occlumency, Potter. The magical defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one.”

“But I thought Voldemort wasn’t possessing me?”

James and Snape both stiffened at Harry’s use of Voldemort’s name, but neither corrected him.

“The headmaster thinks it is a good skill for you to have. You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?”

“Yes.” Harry sat up a little straighter. Here he was, finally, going to learn something that would actually help him fight Voldemort. “Who’s going to be teaching me?”

“I am.”

Harry felt queasy. Extra lessons with Snape? Two hours of Potions was already bad enough.

“Why can’t Dumbledore teach Harry?” asked Remus.

“I suppose because it is a headmaster’s privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks. I assure you, I did not beg for the job.” Snape stood. So did Sirius.

“You don’t get to talk to Remus or Harry like that.”

Lily reached around Remus to pull Sirius back into his seat. “Let it go.”

Snape’s hand started towards his wand, and so did Sirius’s. Neither actually drew, though, and Harry thought it was only because Lily still had a hand on Sirius, and James looked poised to draw as well.

“I will expect you at six o’clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them.”

“That was uncalled for,” James said, now getting to his feet. His hand closed around his wand.

“Boys —” Lily also stood, trying to move between Sirius, James, and Severus, but there was a table in the middle of the room.

The door opened before anyone could fire a spell, but the person least able to dissolve tension walked into the room — Regulus Black.

“Did I interrupt an important Order meeting?” Regulus asked. “My apologies. I just needed to use my own kitchen.”

Sirius snorted, fight with Snape momentarily forgotten. “What could you need from the kitchen you couldn’t ask Kreacher to get for you?”

Regulus shrugged. “Perhaps I merely wanted to make sure Severus was giving you honest information, and not passing along half-truths that might aid the Dark Lord.”

Snape smoothed the front of his robes. “And you’re doing so much for the cause, here in this house. Did you and the Dark Lord discuss your actions at the graveyard beforehand, or did you have to go crawling back to him and insist you were still useful?”

“I nearly killed him, and what about you? In close company with both Dumbledore and the Dark
Lord? Your loyalties are as muddy as your blood.”

There was a collective shout of protest from James, Sirius, and Lily, to Harry’s surprise. He didn’t think it was like them to defend Snape, but Regulus had crossed a line. Harry had never heard Regulus make a comment about blood before, though he knew Regulus must certainly have thought that way at one time. But he had reformed, hadn’t he?

Snape pointed his wand at Regulus; Regulus did not move for his wand. He only stared Snape down evenly, as if he was untouchable despite his defenseless position.

Snape lowered his wand without a curse. “Six o’clock Monday evening, Potter,” and he swept out of the room.

“Well,” Regulus said, once Snape had gone, “I’m afraid I’ve rather lost my appetite.”

Sirius snorted as he left. “Appetite my ass. He just wanted a chance to insult Severus. Not that I blame him, but he went a little far. I thought he was reforming.”

“Kneazles don’t change their stripes,” James sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Well, Harry, Occlumency sounds like a good idea. I guess you’ll have to go back to Hogwarts now.”

“Now I don’t want to go back.” Harry felt queasy at the idea of extra lessons with Snape.

“If he gives you a hard time, let us know,” said Remus.

“Occlumency will be a good skill to have,” Lily said, chewing on her lower lip. Her eyes were still trained on the door, like she was listening for Snape and Regulus to begin fighting in the hallway. “I know you don’t get along with Professor Snape, Harry, but do your best, please.”

Harry always did his best with Snape. It was Snape who unfairly picked on him, kind of the way Umbridge did. His parents didn’t seem too concerned about Snape like they did Umbridge. True, Snape had never given him lines for detention that carved words into his own hands. Mostly Snape just took points from Gryffindor. But that didn’t make Harry like Snape any more than Umbridge. He hated Umbridge more than Snape, but that didn’t mean he liked Snape better than Umbridge.

Harry told Ron and Ginny about his new misfortune as he finished cleaning up their room.

Ginny leaned against the frame of Neville’s bed, casually levitating the terrarium Neville had given Ron. “I expect it’ll keep out those nightmares and dreams of snakes.”

Ron eyed the terrarium as it moved up and down, but he did not seem too concerned with its safety. “I’d rather have the nightmares than extra lessons with Snape!”

Dinner was a much cheerier affair. Mr. Weasley returned home from the hospital, completely cured. Molly and Lily put together a pleasant send-off feast, since Ron, Ginny, Harry, Fred, George, and Cedric would be leaving for Hogwarts the next day. Tonks came by, hastily filled out a report, and stayed for dinner. Fabian and Gideon Prewett also came to celebrate their brother-in-law’s recovery. It was a full-house.

Despite the pleasant end to the evening, morning arrived cold and gray. Lily checked three times that Harry had all his things, and was wearing his cloak. James checked three times that Harry had the mirror, even though Harry assured him it was in his pocket and was not going anywhere else.

The walk to the train station was uneventful, but Harry noticed his parents were on as high alert as they ever had been, walking with their hands on their wand pockets. They met Tonks at the station,
disguised as a middle-aged woman with a wide-nose and mousy brown hair. She winked at Harry as they passed, and continued to push along an innocuous trolley, but Harry saw her wand poking out from beneath her hands’ tight grip along the trolley handle.

They arrived at the train platform at ten-forty-five, later than they’d meant to be, but at least not so late that they had to rush onto the train. There was time for goodbyes.

Lily, James, Sirius, and Remus each hugged Harry longer and tighter than usual. It was strange, Harry thought, to see his parents so tearful. What a change from his first year, when they had been so thrilled for him.

“I’ll be fine, Mum,” he said, as she kissed his forehead for the second time.

She bit down on her lip, and he knew she didn’t believe him. Harry didn’t really believe it, either.

“You promise you’ll actually use the mirror?” she asked. “If you don’t, we’ll just have to come down there.”

“Yes, Mum, I promise.”

She kissed him one more time, James squeezed his shoulder, Harry boarded the train, and that was that.

“Should we look towards the back?” Ron asked, adjusting his grip on his owl cage.

“Sure,” Harry said, absent-mindedly. He followed Cedric, Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George about halfway down the train before Hermione stuck her head out of one of the compartments.

“In here.” She waved them over.

“We’ll find somewhere else,” Fred said.

“No offense,” George added with a wink.

Hermione did not look offended, but she did look suspicious.

“I’m going to look for my Quidditch team,” Cedric said, and waved goodbye.

Hermione ignored him and pulled Harry and Ron into the compartment. Ginny shut the door behind all of them with an amused smile.

“Oh, hi guys,” Neville said, looking up from his plant. “Look, Hermione, they did come after all.”

“Yes, I noticed.” Hermione sat down on the seat and folded her arms over her chest. “Now tell me what happened. You weren’t there in the morning when we were supposed to leave, and McGonagall told me you’d gone home early but wouldn’t say anything else. So tell me. Now.”

Harry glanced at Ron and Ginny. They looked at him like it was his job to share the story. Harry wasn’t particularly interested in rehashing everything, but it was hard to ignore Hermione’s stern glare.

“Er… well I had this dream…..” Harry sat down in the carriage compartment and told Hermione everything from the dream to his Occlumency lessons with Snape. He left out the mirror, though. He trusted Ron and Hermione, but somehow, the mirror felt private. It was, currently, his only way of communicating with his parents. He didn’t want to spoil it somehow by speaking of it.
“Goodness,” Hermione said when he was done. “I’m glad you’re going to be doing these lessons, though. It’ll be good to get rid of those nightmares.”

“It saved Mr. Weasley’s life, though,” said Neville. “It sounds like a good thing to me.”

“We do have an advantage over him with Harry knowing what he’s feeling,” Ron said, “don’t we?”

“It’s dangerous to have your mind vulnerable like that,” said Hermione. “It’d be better to be protected.”

“It sounds like it’s possible You-Know-Who could possess you,” Ginny picked at the weather strip along the edge of the window, “only he hasn’t yet. You should probably take your lessons with Snape seriously.”

Harry remembered what she’d said before Christmas about being possessed by Voldemort. He decided to take her words to heart.

It wasn’t very easy to do though, on Monday night at six, when Harry trudged down to the dungeons for his first Occlumency lesson.

Harry had always found the dungeons creepy, but he’d never had to come down here alone before. The dark stone hallways were lit dimly by torches, and as he pushed open the door to Snape’s classroom, the glowing jars gave the empty room an eerie look. The classroom looked as it usually did — gloomy, cold, and dark — but there was an unfamiliar object beside Snape’s desk. At least, it was unfamiliar in the context of Snape’s dungeon, but Harry had seen this item somewhere else before. Dumbledore’s Pensieve glowed a pale silver in the candlelight. Harry could not understand why it was here.

“Shut the door behind you, Potter,” Snape said, and Harry jumped. Harry hadn’t seen him standing by his cabinet of potion supplies.

Reluctantly, Harry closed the door. The creak of the hinges and the dull thud of the oak against stone echoed in the empty classroom. Harry had the brief thought that he was being sealed in his tomb, but shook it off as Sirius’s dramatics rubbing off on him.

“Well, Potter, you know why you are here.” Snape pointed at the chair across from his desk, and Harry sat. “The headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions.”

Harry bit back a reply that he was fine with Potions when working with his mother, so maybe the problem wasn’t the subject. “Right,” he said.

“This may not be an ordinary class, Potter, but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me ‘sir’ or ‘Professor’ at all times.”

Harry tried to remember when he ever called Snape “sir” or “Professor” and came up with nothing. Still, he was eager to get on with Occlumency and get this evening over with. And he remembered his promise to his mother to do his best. “Yes, sir.”

“Now, Occlumency is a branch of magic that seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence.”

“And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?”

Snape narrowed his eyes at the interruption. Harry expected him to ignore the question and move
on with his explanation, but instead, Snape said, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency —”

“What’s that? — Sir.”

“It’s the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind.”

“But isn’t that what I’m doing to Voldemort? Seeing his memories and feelings? So shouldn’t I learn Legilimency to focus it better? Maybe I could —”

“Do not say the Dark Lord’s name!”

The dungeon grew deathly quiet. Harry adjusted in his chair. “Mum says his name.”

A strange expression twisted across Snape’s face. It was not a sneer of disgust, but it was not a smile, either. Harry did not know what to describe it as.

“Your mother made that decision in full knowledge and defiance of the danger it may bring her. The rest of us . . .” Snape rubbed his forearm, where his Dark Mark was hidden beneath his robes. “It is unwise to speak his name.”

Harry chose his next question carefully. “I just don’t understand why I need to learn Occlumency when I could learn Legilimency.”

Snape’s face returned to its cold impassivity. “As is so fitting for you, the usual rules of Legilimency and Occlumency do not seem to apply with you. Despite the Dark Lord’s vast power, even he cannot peer into the mind of anyone at will. Legilimency requires eye contact. Not, however, for you. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable — when you are asleep, for instance — you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”

“So Vol — er — he could possess me if he wanted to?”

“It appears the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up until now it seems you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord’s thoughts. It seems that he realized your presence. The Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return.” Snape pulled his wand from his robe and Harry tensed. “That,” he pressed his wand to his temple, “is why you must learn Occlumency.” Snape drew his wand away from his head and thick silvery strands came with the wand. He dropped the threads into the Pensieve beside his desk where they floated and swirled in the basin.

Snape repeated this process two more times then stood. He moved the Pensieve to a shelf, out of the way, then faced Harry, wand still tight in his grip.

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry did as he was told. He hoped this was not going to be a duel.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.
That sounded an awful lot like a duel. “What are you going to do — sir?”

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind. We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. You will find that similar powers are needed for this. Brace yourself, now. *Legilimens!*”

Harry felt like he’d had more warning when Voldemort had cast the Imperius Curse. He barely had a moment to wonder if Snape had heard about Harry’s skill at resisting from Dumbledore or Voldemort before the dungeon around him vanished before his eyes.

Instead of Snape’s dungeon, memories filled his mind, memories he hadn’t thought about in years, but came bursting to the front, full of their emotional baggage as well. First he was only four or five, lost in the estate’s gardens, somehow separated from whoever had been watching him, sobbing with all his might. Then suddenly, Harry was ten, listening at the kitchen door while his parents’ discussed his ability to speak Parseltongue, and Harry felt fear and anxiety build up in him, and guilt, like he had done something wrong. Then he was under the Sorting Hat, and that same anxiety swelled as the Hat told him he would do well in Slytherin. Hermione was asleep in a hospital wing, covered in thick black fur, then a hundred dementors were swooping down on him beside the Black Lake, and then Cho Chang drew nearer under the mistletoe —

There was a sharp pain in his knee as Harry did everything in his power to throw Snape away from his mind. He hadn’t even told his parents about Cho. Snape was certainly not getting that.

Snape’s office slowly came back into view. Harry was no longer standing in it, though, he was on the floor, his knee throbbing from hitting the stone. Snape stood above him, rubbing a red scorch mark on his wrist.

“Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?” asked Snape.

“No.” Harry pushed himself up to his feet.

“I thought not. You let me get in too far. You lost control.”

“Did you see everything I saw?”

“Flashes of it. Do you do a lot of listening at doors, Potter?”

Harry did not answer. He did not like eavesdropping, and he did not like knowing how anxious his parents could be about his safety. There was no way to explain any of this to Snape, though, so he only adjusted his grip on his wand.

“For a first attempt it was not as poor as it might have been. You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand.”

“I’m trying, but you’re not telling me how!”

“Manners, Potter. Now, close your eyes.”

Harry heard Mad-Eye Moody telling him to never turn his back on an opponent, but reluctantly did as Snape said.

“Clear your mind, Potter. Let go of all emotion.”

But Snape had just dredged up quite a bit of emotion, and Harry did not know how to put it all
away again. He felt angry with Snape and anxious about Voldemort. He took two deep breaths through his nose, but he did not feel any calmer.

“You’re not doing it, Potter. You need more discipline than this. Focus, now.”

Harry wondered if he could hex Snape before Snape cast his spell again. It sounded much easier than letting go of his anger — it might even help let go of his anger.

“Let’s go again, on the count of three. One — two — three — Legilimens!”

Harry saw himself in the Mirror of Erised, scarless, with happy parents. He was falling from his broom and his mother was screaming in the crowd somewhere. Then he was in the graveyard, suffering the pain of the Cruciatus Curse; Cedric was lifeless on the ground; Voldemort whispered in his ear to kill Cedric Diggory —

“No!” Harry had fallen to the floor again, hands pressed to his forehead. His head felt as though it would burst. It was not the usual burn from his scar, but an intensive ache. He could not focus on anything at all.

“Get up!” Snape said. “Get up! You are not trying. You are making no effort. You are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry stood on shaky legs. The fear and anger that he had felt in the graveyard rushed through his veins now. And as he looked at Snape, fury joined those feelings. His blood felt as if it would boil him alive. Snape, too, looked furious with him.

“I am making an effort,” Harry said, still panting for breath.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotions.”

“I’m finding that hard at the moment.”

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord. Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

“I’m not weak,” he said, thinking, too, of his mother, and her fury, and how it so often seemed to give her strength.

“Then prove it. Master yourself! Control your anger; discipline your mind. We shall try again. Ready, now, Legilimens!”

His mother was collapsed in a grassy field, wand out of her hand, as Harry desperately tried to shake her back to consciousness. He was sitting in detention with Umbridge, furious with her, as the quill carved words into the back of his hand. His father was leading him hastily down a windowless passage, drawing nearer to a plain black door at the end of a corridor, torches on either side of them —

“I know! I know!”

The classroom returned. Again, Harry was on the floor, but this time he felt victorious rather than defeated. He stood, though, to find Snape standing with his wand still poised. He had ceased his attack before Harry had been able to mount a defense.
“What happened just then, Potter?”

“I saw — I remembered. I realized…..”

“Realized what?”

The door his father had nearly led him towards, before they had diverted to a flight of stairs. The door he had seen Mr. Malfoy and the Minister talking in front of. The door in his dreams, the door the snake had been investigating —

“What’s in the Department of Mysteries?”

The corner of Snape’s mouth twitched. “What did you say?”

“I said, what’s in the Department of Mysteries, sir?” Harry’s anger melted, just a little, at the satisfaction of watching Snape’s fury grow with this question.

“And why would you ask such a thing?”

“Because that corridor I’ve just seen, I’ve been dreaming about it for months. I’ve just recognized it, it leads to the Department of Mysteries. Voldemort wants something from —”

“I have told you not to say the Dark Lord’s name!”

Harry’s scar burned as he and Snape stared each other down, fury sharp in each of their eyes. Snape, though, seemed far more adept at masking his anger. When he spoke, his voice was softer, returned to its usual coldness.

“There are many thing in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you. Do I make myself plain?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry rubbed at his forehead, now more concerned with getting rid of the prickling in his scar.

“I want you back here same time on Wednesday, and we will continue work then.”

“Fine.” Harry was more than grateful to leave Snape’s office. He grabbed his bag from one of the desks.

“You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before you sleep — empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

Harry was hardly listening. “Yes,” he said.

“I shall know if you have not practiced.”

“Right.” Harry pulled the door open and moved as quickly as he could manage up the stairs. There was still a bit of waning light outside, filtering through the first floor windows. Harry stopped against the side of an archway and pressed his head against the cool stone. It helped the burning, but only a little.

“Harry? Are you alright?”

Harry jumped and quickly wiped his forehead with his sleeve, hoping to get rid of most of the sweat on his face before he looked at Cho.
“Cho — yes — hi — er, I’m alright. Are you alright?”

“I’m quite well. You don’t look too well, though.” She looked concerned. “Should I fetch Madam Pomfrey?”

“No — thanks, but I’m alright. Really. It’s just… er, I had, uh, Remedial Potions, with Snape, and it was — er, it got warm and stuffy in the dungeons.” Harry wished his scar didn’t hurt so bad, or he might be able to think of a better excuse than telling Cho he was in Remedial Potions.

“Oh. That sounds terrible.”

Harry, despite the pain in his scar, recalled a time when Cho had called him brave. He attempted to look nonchalant and shrugged. “It’s not so bad.” But he was desperate for another line of conversation. “Er — how was your Christmas?”

“It was pretty quiet…. Yours?”

“Not bad.” He adjusted the bag on his shoulder, which seemed unusually heavy.

Her cheeks flushed pink suddenly, and Harry wondered what he’d said to embarrass her.

“Er — there’s another Hogsmeade trip next month. Did you see the notice?”

“Oh. No.” Without Quidditch practices, and so many of Umbridge’s rules going up, Harry generally avoided the notice board these days.

“It’s on Valentine’s Day.”

Harry felt like Cho was trying to tell him something important, but his head was still pounding, and he was having a hard time thinking about anything other than her brown eyes.

Cho bit down on her lower lip. “I don’t suppose you’d want to —”

“Go?” he finished at the last minute. “Go to Hogsmeade, together, on Valentine’s Day,” he said in a rush, finally putting it all together.

Her cheeks were now bright red. “Er, yes, if you’d want to.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay,” she was still biting her lower lip, but now she seemed like she was trying to hide her smile.

“I’ll see you later.”

She paused, and Harry wondered if he should lean in for a kiss. But before he could make up his mind, Cho passed him and headed up the stairs. Harry waited a moment longer, both watching her go and wishing his head would stop aching, before going to find Ron and Hermione.

He found them in the library with Neville, tucked away with a large stack of parchment, working away at Umbridge’s assignment. The library was full of students, mostly fifth years, struggling through neglected holiday homework.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Hermione asked as he sat down.

“You look terrible,” said Neville.

Harry knew he had meant to tell Hermione something very important, but in the wake of asking out...
Cho, he could not remember it. “Er — fine, I think….”

“You’re really pale, mate,” said Ron. He dug a handkerchief from his bag and handed it to Harry so he could wipe the sweat from his brow. “What did Snape do to you?”

What Harry wanted to tell them came back in a rush and his scar throbbed worse than ever. Harry pressed his hands to his forehead. “Nothing — it’s — listen, I forgot, but I’ve just realized something.” Harry told them about what he’d seen in his memories, the door to the Department of Mysteries, and how it had kept cropping up in his dreams.

When he finished, Ron whispered, “So… you’re saying that the weapon — the thing You-Know-Who is after — is in the Ministry of Magic?”

“The Department of Mysteries, it’s got to be. It’s the same one your dad was guarding in my dream, too.”

“Of course,” said Hermione. “Remember Sturgis Podmore was arrested trying to get through a door at the Ministry of Magic? It must have been that one!”

“How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he’s on our side?” asked Ron.

Hermione tapped her quill against her mouth. “I don’t know. That is odd….”

“What’s in the Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked Ron and Neville. “Have your parents ever mentioned anything about it?”

Ron frowned. “I know they call the people who work in there ‘Unspeakables,’ because no one really seems to know what they do in there. Weird place to have a weapon.”

“Not really,” said Neville. “Mum says that’s where the Ministry does all their top secret research. She wanted to work there first but became an Auror because of the war.”

Another bolt of pain lanced through Harry’s head. He winced and tried pushing the pain out with the heels of his hands. It was as ineffective as always.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Fine.” He pulled his hands away and saw they were shaking. He wanted to believe it was from nerves of asking Cho out on a date, but he knew that was probably not the explanation. “I don’t like Occlumency much.”

“I expect anyone would feel shaky if they’d had their mind attacked over and over again. Let’s get back to the common room. We’ll be more comfortable there.”

Hermione and Ron gathered up their books and papers. Neville asked Harry if he wanted help up the stairs to the common room, but he declined his assistance. Ron offered to carry his bag, but Harry declined that, too — at least until the fifth flight, when Ron took it from him without asking, and Harry pretended not to be relieved.

The common room, however, was not as relaxing as Hermione had predicted. Fred and George were there, showing off their newest product — Headless Hats.

The four of them managed to find seats in a corner, but the squeals and applause as Fred and George placed feathered hats on their heads, only to have hat and head disappear, proved to be too much for Harry, who was already on edge as it was.
He’d barely opened his bag and closed it again. “I’m going to have to do this tomorrow,” he said.

“Write it in your planner so you don’t forget it,” said Hermione.

Harry reluctantly but obediently scribbled the assignment into his new planner as it chided him for procrastination.

“Don’t leave it till later, you big second-rater!” it sang at him.

Harry snapped the book shut and shoved it into his bag. He weaved his way through the crowd, anxious for the peace and quiet of an empty dormitory. As he climbed the stairs, he put a hand on the wall for support. He suddenly felt very ill, like he had when he dreamed of the snake. He did not want to be sick on the stairs, so he hurried to his room. Perhaps if he just lied down for a bit —

Harry had only just put his hand on the dormitory door when his head burst with pain so intense, it felt as if someone had dropped a solid gold cauldron on his head. All thought fled his mind. There was nothing but pain, and then loud laughter. He was happy, so very happy. He had not felt this happiness for many, many years. Something wonderful had just happened —

“Harry! Harry, stop!”

And Harry did stop laughing, because he’d been struck in the face. The laughter still echoed in his ears, though the feeling slowly faded out of reach. His head still hurt, and his cheek throbbed, but he managed to open his eyes.

He was on the floor, looking up at Ron Neville. He was out of breath, and his throat felt raw. He realized the laughter had been his own.

Ron helped him stand and led him to his bed. “What happened?”

“I dunno.” Harry gratefully accepted the cold glass of water Neville handed him and pressed it to his forehead. “He’s really happy… really happy. Something good’s happened.” The cool glass trembled in his shaky hand and water sloshed onto his face and robes. He hardly noticed. “It’s something he’s been hoping for.” Harry closed his eyes and tried very hard not to be sick all over Ron and Neville.

“Hermione asked us to come check on you,” Neville said in a shaky voice. “She says your defenses are low right now, after Snape’s been poking round in your head.”

Ron reached out and took the glass from Harry. He held it steady against Harry’s forehead. “It’ll help in the long run, won’t it?”

Harry’s parents had seemed to think so. Ginny seemed to think so, too. Harry wasn’t so sure himself.

“I’ve got to talk to my parents,” Harry said.

Ron frowned. “You know we can’t use the Floo —”

“No, in my cloak.” Harry felt that the urgency of Voldemort being happier than he had been for fourteen years took precedence over his desire to keep the mirror a secret from even his friends.

Neville reached for Harry’s cloak. “What is it?”

“The inside pocket, there’s a mirror.”
It took Neville a moment, but he did bring Harry the mirror.

Harry saw his pallid face, drenched in sweat, and almost wished he hadn’t pulled the mirror out at all.

“Dad?” he said to it. “Mum? Sirius? Uncle Remus — anybody?”

At first, Harry did not think it would work. Perhaps the mirror had just been another prank of his father’s and Sirius’s. Then Harry’s reflection vanished, and the surface of the mirror was dark. He could hear voices talking, but they were too far to make out. He recognized them, though. It was the familiar sound of an argument between Sirius and Regulus.

“Sirius! Sirius, are you there?”

The dark surface moved, and then Harry was looking at Sirius’s face.

“Hey, didn’t think you’d call so soon — Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said, know he needed to tell Sirius what had happened as quickly as possible. “Listen, I’ve just had another… another — er, I don’t know what, but Voldemort’s excited. Something really good has happened. It’s really good, and that means it must be really bad for us, right?”

“Slow down, slow down. What is it that’s happened?”

Harry took a deep breath and started to repeat himself, but there was a flash of silver in the mirror, cutting him off.

“Just a moment, Harry —” Sirius looked away, and there was an unfamiliar voice, speaking more words that were to muffled for Harry to hear, “— Listen, Harry,” Sirius brought the mirror back up to his face, “something’s just happened, and I need to go. Stay inside, alright? Talk to us tomorrow night. I know your parents will want to hear from you.”

And before Harry could say anything else, Sirius’s face vanished, and Harry was looking at his own reflection again. He dropped the mirror onto his bed and ran his hands through his hair. Sirius hadn’t even heard him. But it seemed like that hadn’t mattered — Sirius had found out somehow, anyway. Perhaps the Order really didn’t need Harry to see into Voldemort’s mind.

“That seems pretty handy,” Ron said, and picked the mirror up. “Be a good way to ask them questions whenever we want, yeah?” He grinned, but Harry did not feel like Ron had made a joke.

Ron slipped the mirror back into Harry’s coat pocket. “You should rest.”

Harry did not need telling twice. He set his glasses on the table, and Neville closed the curtains around Harry’s bed. He did not care that he had not changed into his pajamas. He did not care that his clothes still clung to him, and he still felt both feverish and chilled. The only thing Harry worried about was what on earth could make Voldemort so happy, and what had just happened at the Order’s Headquarters?

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated.
Harry did not have to wait until evening to find out what had happened to interrupt his call with Sirius and what had happened to make Voldemort so excited. It was all over the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

**Mass Breakout From Azkaban**

**Ministry Fears Black is “Rallying Point” For Old Death Eaters**

On the front page were photographs of nine wizards and one witch. Some of the wizards looked furious at having been captured, mouths opened in silent shouts, fists banging on the walls of their prison. A few, including the witch, were laughing maniacally, unbothered by their capture.

Three of them Harry recognized immediately.

Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, and Rabastan Lestrange. All three of them had been in Dumbledore’s memories, at the trial for the torture of Alice and Frank Longbottom, along with Barty Crouch, Jr. and Regulus Black. Beneath each of their names it read, *convicted of the torture of Frank and Alice Longbottom*. For the others, there were similar lines: *convicted of assisting in the murders of Edgar Bones, Julia Bones, and their children Mary, May, and Melissa*, or *convicted of dismembering and disfiguring Gideon and Fabian Prewett*, or *convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic Secrets to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*. That last caption belonged to Augustus Rookwood, a name Harry also remembered from one of the trials in Dumbledore’s memories, though he had never seen the man’s face.
“So they still won’t admit he’s back?” Harry said, skimming the article enough to notice they were claiming Regulus Black was responsible for the breakout, and the Death Eaters were rallying to him.

Hermione snorted. “Can you imagine Fudge admitting he was wrong now? ‘Sorry, everyone, Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort, and now his worst supporters have broken out too.’” She took the paper back from Harry, who had no interest in reading it anyway. He didn’t need to know what lies the Ministry had concocted to explain away something that was so obviously a sign of Voldemort’s return.

“Can I see it when you’re done, Hermione?” asked Neville in a quiet voice. He was sitting across from them with an empty plate, and it wasn’t empty because he’d eaten his fill. Neville hadn’t touched his breakfast at all.

“Yes,” she said, eyes reading the article quickly. After a moment, she handed it to Neville, but while Neville read, she continued to stare at the paper, mind clearly still working at something.

“What is it, Hermione?” asked Harry.

“It’s only…” She stood suddenly.

“Going somewhere?” asked Ron.

“To send a letter. It… well I don’t know whether… but it’s worth trying, and I’m the only one who can.”

And she was gone.

“I hate when she does that,” said Ron. “It would only take her ten more seconds to actually tell us what was going on.”

Harry agreed.

He looked around the Great Hall, wondering why more people weren’t as tense as he, Ron, Hermione, and Neville were, but there were very few owls that delivered the Daily Prophet to Hogwarts. He saw Cho laughing with her friends, clearly unconcerned. Even Cedric was grinning as Amber Lais punched him in the arm.

Then Harry saw the exceptions: Ernie Macmillan, folding up the newspaper looking pale and unusually silent. Susan Bones, not far away, holding her hand over her mouth as she read a letter from home. Two seventh-year Slytherins Harry did not know whispering furiously to each other as they exited the Hall, far too early to be on their way to class. Anthony Goldstein had not opened his newspaper, but was looking at the front page in stunned silence while Michael Corner and Terry Boot carried their conversation on in ignorance.

Harry turned and looked up at the staff table. McGonagall and Dumbledore were engaged in an intense but quiet conversation. He suspected they had gotten the news last night, surely around the time Sirius had gotten it. Most of the other professors were tucked away behind newspapers, reading every detail of the article. Umbridge did not have a paper in front of her, but she scowled at her porridge as if it had delivered her the same terrible news. Harry wondered if there was any possibility she would lighten up on him now that it was obvious something terrible was truly happening. It seemed like too much to hope for.

And Harry was right. As the news of a massive breakout from Azkaban filtered through the school, a new educational decree made its appearance.
Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-six.*

The decree, as absurd it was, was not the worst of it all. Umbridge had put two teachers on probation now: Trelawney and Hagrid. Neither was taking the stress of it well; both were increasingly distracted during lessons, which did not help either’s case.

Harry noticed, too, that other students were now getting detentions like his. Lee Jordan had made a joke to Professor Umbridge, telling her she wasn’t allowed to tell him and the twins off for being disruptive in class, because that was not related to Defense Against the Dark Arts. He’d come back to the common room that night with his hand bleeding. Harry recommended a conversation with McGonagall and essence of murtlap.

There was very little left for Harry to enjoy at Hogwarts. His classes were increasingly demanding as O.W.L.s approached, he could not play Quidditch to relieve his stress, and he was now unable to visit Hagrid in the evenings, because Hagrid was terrified of losing his job over it. Daily, Harry considered his parents’ offer to spend the rest of the school year at home.

The only thing that kept Harry from begging his parents to take him away was the D.A. He spent his time in Umbridge’s class planning new lessons for his friends, who had improved this month at an accelerated pace. The news of ten escaped Death Eaters had spurred each and every one of them to study relentlessly. Even Neville was suddenly one of Harry’s best students. Harry remembered how Neville had become serious and determined when Regulus Black had escaped Azkaban. He remembered how Neville had attacked Barty Crouch, Jr. when the truth about who had attacked his parents had been revealed. It was this serious, determined Neville who made an appearance in the D.A. In fact, the only person who mastered the Shield Charm faster than Neville was Hermione.

If only Harry could do as well in Occlumency as Neville was doing in Defense.

If Occlumency was supposed to help keep Harry and Voldemort’s minds separated, it wasn’t working. Harry’s scar hurt worse than ever these days, and he felt far more attuned to Voldemort’s emotions than he had before he’d begun his lessons with Snape.

“It’s like, I’ll be sitting in class and I’ll just feel a jolt of annoyance for no reason,” Harry complained to his father one night through the mirror. “It’s worse than it used to be, not better. My scar hurts all the time. And I keep dreaming about that stupid corridor every night. I’m tired of it. Can’t you at least tell me what’s down there?”

James’s smile was sympathetic. “I know it’s hard, Harry, but you have to keep working at this.”

“I am working at it!”

“I know, I know.”

Harry sighed and leaned his head back against the locked bathroom door. “Where’s mum?”

“She and Sirius are scouting a place we think the Death Eaters might be hiding.” He gnawed on his lip. “You know I shouldn’t be telling you these things. This is why Occlumency is so important. If you were protected, we wouldn’t have to worry about secrets.”

He rubbed at his scar. He wanted to learn Occlumency, he really did. He just wasn’t any good at it.
“Should I send back the Invisibility Cloak? Do you think you and Mum need it more?”

“No, no, Harry, that’s yours. I gave it to you as a gift, as my father gave it to me, and someday you’ll give it to your kid. It’s nice of you to worry, but you shouldn’t.”

“But I do worry. You guys are out there putting yourselves in danger all the time. And there are more Death Eaters loose now. Who knows what could happen?”

“That’s how we feel about you.” James laughed, but it didn’t sound particularly jovial.

Someone knocked on the door. “Harry?” Neville asked. “Are you nearly done in there?”

“Guess I have to go.”

“We love you, Snitch.”

“Love you too, Dad.” And his father’s face vanished from the mirror.

Harry slipped the glass back into his pocket and unlocked the bathroom door so Neville could get ready for bed.


—— —— ——

Between the D.A. lessons, preparing for O.W.L.s, and Occlumency lessons, January passed more quickly than Harry had expected. Before he knew it, the trip to Hogsmeade was coming up, and with it, Harry’s date with Cho.

They’d spoken only briefly at D.A. meetings, and hardly at all between classes. She was strangely cold at D.A. lessons, though Harry suspected that was because Cedric was there. He was growing curious about why and how they had broken up, but the only way to know the answer to that question was to ask Cedric or Cho, and Harry had no interest in either of those conversations.

The morning of, Harry tried unsuccessfully to comb his hair flat. He stared at his wardrobe for a solid fifteen minutes, unsure which clothes to put on. He settled on the ones that looked cleanest and joined Ron, Hermione, and Neville for breakfast.

Hermione was anxiously scanning a letter with vaguely familiar handwriting. She looked up at Harry as he sat and smiled. “Harry! Listen, it’s important — do you think you could meet me in the Three Broomsticks around midday?”

Harry frowned. “I’m supposed to be with Cho today. I don’t know how long, though.”

“Bring her along if you must, but please come,” she said.

“But why?”

“I can’t tell you now,” Hermione said. “I’ve got to answer this letter and talk to Cedric,” and then she was gone.

Harry stared after her as she rushed across the hall to the Hufflepuff table. “Will you be there?” He looked between Ron and Neville.

Ron shook his head. “I can’t go at all. Angelina wants a full day’s training. Like it’s going to help — we’re the worst team I’ve ever seen. You should see Sloper and Kirke. They’re pathetic, even worse than I am. Dunno why Angelina won’t just let me resign.”
“Because you’re good when you’re on form,” Harry snapped.

Ron seemed to take the hint about not complaining to Harry about having to play Quidditch. He knew Harry would give anything to be on a broom again. Harry hoped that Ron might try harder at practice today, though it wasn’t more practice Ron really needed. It was more confidence. Harry didn’t know how to give that to him.

“Neville? Did Hermione drag you into this?”

Neville shook his head. “Susan and I were going to check out Zonko’s. Mum liked that nose-biting teacup I bought a while ago. Her birthday’s coming up, so I thought I’d get her a set. Gran would hate it, so Mum would love it.”

Harry searched the Great Hall for Hermione, wondering if perhaps he could see her and ask her what she was up to, but she was gone. There was nothing for it, no sense in stalling any longer. Though he’d had his fill of breakfast, his stomach still felt jittery as he walked towards the doors of the castle.

Cho was there, just to the side of the doors, long dark hair pulled up in a ponytail. She smiled, and her lips glistened a little in the gray light from outside. How odd, Harry thought, that they had already kissed once, and yet Harry felt so nervous at the idea of just walking with her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” Harry stopped next to her. There was a pause where Cho looked at him expectantly, but Harry did not know what she wanted from him. “Er — shall we go then?”

“Oh — yes.”

They made it outside without saying a word to each other. Harry did not know what to say to Cho. He had not had much real conversation with her, other than their stilted one in the owlery, before Cedric had interrupted it. Walking outside was easier, like doing something in uncomfortable silence was at least more comfortable than standing in uncomfortable silence.

As they walked towards the town, Harry glanced over at the Quidditch pitch. He could see three figures floating above the stands. A fourth zipped between them quickly. He recognized Angelina’s speed and sharp turns anywhere, and Ron and Ginny’s hair glinted brightly against the pale sky.

“You miss it, don’t you?” asked Cho.

Harry had not realized she was watching him. “Er — yeah.”

“Remember the first time we played against each other in third year?”

“Yeah, you kept blocking me.”

“And you kept feinting,” she laughed. “Took me for a few turns.”

“You almost had me at the very end, you know.”

“Nearly. That Firebolt of yours, though, it’s hard to compete with — I mean, not that you aren’t a really good player —”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, “I know what you mean. All the pros use Firebolts.”
“Yes! I was at the World Cup, too, they were all so fast.”

“It was a good game, wasn’t it?” Harry said, latching onto the topic of conversation. It was easy to talk about the game. It was easier than talking to Ron and Hermione in a lot of ways. They could exchange ideas and laughter simply. He did not have to explain Quidditch things like he did for Hermione or prepare for Ron to mope about something. Their conversation was friendly and polite. Harry was just beginning to think that maybe dating wasn’t so hard after all when Pansy Parkinson and a pack of other girls from Slytherin passed them.

“Potter and Chang?” she said with a disgusted sneer. “Ugh. Have you gone blind? At least Diggory was good-looking.”

Cho’s face flushed red, and Harry felt his own ears burn. He did not want Cho to go cold on him again, the way she always did when Cedric came up. He awkwardly reached for her hand, brushing the back of it, but she pulled away as they walked.

“Er — where do you want to go?”

She shrugged. “Shall we just… look in the shops or something?”

Harry followed her around the shops. He saw Neville and Luna purchasing nose-biting teacups, looking perfectly cheerful in each other’s company. Susan and Ernie were holding hands as the passed from Dervish and Banges to Scrivenshaft’s. They all made it look so simple.

“It’s funny,” Cho said, stopping in front of the Quidditch store. Harry looked at the brooms on display, then realized she was not looking at the shop’s merchandise. She was looking at the wanted poster that was hanging in every shop window, plastered with the faces of the ten escaped Death Eaters.

“What’s funny?” Harry asked, not sure he thought any part of the situation was funny.

“Remember when Regulus Black escaped from Azkaban, and there were dementors all over Hogsmeade looking for him? And now ten Death Eaters are on the loose and there aren’t dementors anywhere…..”

“Yeah.” Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Guess they’re not doing their job anymore.”

Cho looked up at him, eyes wide. He was surprised that she had not come to that conclusion already. He supposed it must be hard when no one wanted to admit the truth of Voldemort’s return.

They left the window to look at the other shops, but the faces of the ten Death Eaters followed them in each store. It was unnerving, like a constant reminder to Harry that there was danger around them, as if his scar prickling wasn’t enough of a reminder.

As rain began to fall, Cho asked, “D’you want to get a coffee?”

“Yeah, alright — where — ?”

“Oh, haven’t you ever been to Madam Puddifoot’s?” she asked. “It’s a really nice place, just up here.” She led them down a side road into a tiny tea shop Harry had never seen before. It was decorated in enough pink lace and bows to please even Umbridge. It made Harry a little ill.

“Cute, isn’t it?” Cho asked.

“Er — sort of.”
Cho pushed the door open and they walked into the cramped shop.

“Look, she’s decorated for Valentine’s!” Cho pointed to the ceiling, where cherubs hovered, spitting pink confetti over each table. Harry was not as impressed as Cho was.

Especially as he looked around at the tables and saw they were all filled with couples. Roger Davies and a girl with a green ribbon in her long blonde hair sat at one table holding hands. Each table, it seemed, was cuddling or holding hands. The only exception seemed to be Cedric Diggory, who was here with Amber; they were just sitting at a table talking without any of the intimacy Harry saw in the other couples.

Cho started towards an empty table and Harry jumped in front of her. He pulled out a chair for her, so she could have her back to Cedric. Harry did not need this date to be any more awkward than it already was.

“Oh, thank you,” she said with a smile, and sat down. Harry sat across from her, eyes darting over her shoulder to Cedric every few moments. It did not look like Cedric was on a date, exactly. He and Amber were not leaning in close to each other, and their faces were incredibly somber. Harry looked back at Cho and realized he and Cho probably looked more like Cedric and Amber, having a cold and serious cup of coffee, than Roger Davies and his girlfriend, who had now begun kissing each other over the clotted cream.

Madam Puddifoot came by and took down their coffee order. As she left, Harry glanced again at Roger Davies, wondering why the idea of kissing Cho now made him so nervous. His first kiss with her had not been that long ago. But here he was, across from her now, unable to even reach across the table and hold her hand.

“Did you hear what Umbridge said to Luna the other day?” Cho asked, suddenly, and Harry seized on the line of conversation like it was a rope pulling him out of a bog. They spent the next few minutes laughing about how absurd Luna could be, especially when it came to being disciplined by Umbridge, and they insulted Umbridge herself a good bit, but there was only so much that had not been said at D.A. meetings already, that the line did not get them very far.

After a few more moments of painful and awkward silence, Madam Puddifoot returned with their coffees.

Harry, desperate for any line of conversation, reached for the sugar bowl and asked, “Er — would you want to come down with me to the Three Broomsticks at lunchtime? Hermione Granger asked me to meet her there. She said it wouldn’t matter if you came with.”

Cho stared at Harry like he had a Skrewt growing out of his ear. “Well. That was nice of her.” But she sounded like she talked to Cedric. Harry wondered what he’d just done wrong.

“Roger asked me out, you know,” she said suddenly. Harry followed her gaze to where Roger was still kissing the blonde girl. “A couple weeks ago. I turned him down, though.”

“Roger will ask out anything on two legs,” Harry said, then realized how bad that sounded the moment it passed his lips. “But — I mean, I asked you out. Because — because I like you.”

Cho stared at Harry and he wondered what she was waiting for. Pink confetti fluttered down to their table. A few sprinkles landed in Harry’s coffee. Irritably, Harry reached for a spoon to fish the sprinkles out, but they dissolved in his coffee.

“They’re made of sugar,” Cho said, voice still a little cold. She used the tip of her finger to pick
one of the confetti sprinkles off the table and licked it off her finger.

“Must be hard to clean up.”

“I’m sure there’s a spell for it.”

“Oh.” Harry searched again for another line of conversation, something more interesting than sugar and cleaning spells. “So, er, you like the Tornadoes, right? How’s their season?” Even though he already knew the answer, he was desperate for anything.

“Good. They’re doing well.” There was another pause, then Cho said, “I’ve never asked — who do you support?”

“Oh, we don’t have a local team. The Tornadoes are probably the closest to us, so we go to a lot of their games. And Dad got asked to play for the Banchory Bangers, so we support them sometimes. Mum and Sirius like the Holyhead Harpies. And we always cheer for England and Wales’s national teams.”

“Are you Welsh?”

“No, but Uncle Remus is — Professor Lupin — or at least, his mum was.”

“I didn’t know you were related to Professor Lupin.”

“Er — sort of. He’s a good friend of Dad’s. Like Sirius.”

Cho dropped her voice low, and her eyes to her coffee. “And they’re all fighting back, too, aren’t they? Like we are?”

Harry was startled by the sudden change in conversation. The Order of the Phoenix may be a secret, but Harry was pretty sure it was public knowledge that his parents stood behind Dumbledore. “Yeah, they are.”

“You’re lucky, you know.”

Harry didn’t often describe himself as lucky, but he decided to let her finish instead of correcting her.

“I mean — your parents, on your side. They’re fighting for you. When I told my parents Cedric broke up with me, they were happy. They said it’d be better not to be with someone who was against the Ministry.”

Harry frowned. Comforting Cho about her breakup with Cedric was not how he pictured this afternoon going. “Did you tell them you were going on a date with me?”

“Of course I didn’t. It’s none of their business who I date and don’t date.” Cho wiped her cheeks with her hands. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to… to cry —”

“It’s okay. Sometimes it… happens.” It sounded ridiculous coming out of Harry’s mouth, but he didn’t have any better words. He put his hand on the table, palm open, in case she wanted to hold it. She’d moved away so quickly earlier, he didn’t think she’d want to, but offering it seemed like the right thing to do.

This time, Cho took his hand. She squeezed it and smiled gratefully. For a moment, Harry’s heart thumped excitedly — this, this was what a date was supposed to feel like.
Then Cho’s fingers ran along the back of his hand and she frowned. She turned his hand over and looked at the scars Umbridge had carved into his skin.

“What happened?”

In as few words as possible, Harry told her.

He tried to keep his voice quiet. Surely Umbridge’s detentions were well-known by now, as he wasn’t the only student subjected to her cruelty anymore, but he did not like the idea of everyone having new gossip about him. Despite his best efforts, Harry was sure he saw Cedric’s head turn towards their conversation.

“Harry, that’s awful,” Cho said, and she was crying again. “It must have been so terrifying.”

Terrifying wasn’t the word. But Harry didn’t want to argue with her. He just wanted her to stop crying.

“I’m alright now,” he said. But that only made her cry harder. Harry didn’t understand why. His mum hadn’t even cried when he’d told her about his detentions. She’d come close, but Lily’s first response was always anger. Cho, it seemed, went a different route.

“Should we, er, keep walking around?” he suggested. His coffee was only half-done, but Harry had little interest in sitting here holding Cho’s hand while she cried over him.

Cho let go of his hand to wipe her cheeks with her sleeves. “Okay — let me go, um, I’ll just, be right back.” And she got up and disappeared into the ladies’ room, presumably to clean up her face.

Harry reached into his pocket and put a galleon on the table for their coffees. It was probably pretty far over the cost of their two coffees, but he didn’t feel like waiting for the check.

As he stood, so did Cedric and Amber. Cedric turned and looked at Harry with a half-smile. “See you at the Three Broomsticks?”

Harry blinked. “You’re going, too?”

“Hermione asked me to. Didn’t she tell you what it was about?”

“No… she didn’t. She told you?”

“Yeah, it’s about —” Cedric’s eyes drifted over Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned and saw Cho returning.

As soon as Cho reached them, she linked her arm in Harry’s, surprisingly close for the distance they’d kept before their cup of coffee.

“Ready to go?” she asked in a strangely bright voice for how upset she had just been.

“Er — sure,” Harry said. He waved a hasty goodbye to Cedric and Amber as Cho half-dragged him to the door. He didn’t blame her for wanting to get out of there in a hurry. He knew she didn’t want to talk to Cedric. He didn’t understand, though, why she was clinging to his arm.

They stepped outside the door of Madam Puddifoot’s and were met with sheets of rain. Walking around was not really an option anymore.

“Do you want to check out Zonko’s?” Harry asked.
Cho wrinkled her nose. “The joke shop?”

“They have this nose-biting teacup that’s pretty funny.” Harry glanced back at Madam Puddifoot’s. “Or we could go back inside….”

“No,” Cho said stubbornly, and tightened her grip on Harry’s arm. “Let’s go to Zonko’s.”

Neither Harry nor Cho had thought to bring an umbrella, so Harry held his cloak over her head as they walked quickly back to the main road and into Zonko’s Joke Shop. Inside, Harry shook his wet cloak out over a bucket, then walked the shelves with Cho. He showed her the nose-biting teacup. She didn’t seem to think it as funny as he did, but she laughed politely when the teacup latched onto Harry’s nose.

Harry also showed her some of the fake wands, and mentioned that Fred and George’s were far better.

“Oh, are they still trying to sell their joke stuff?” Cho asked. “I thought they’d have given up on it by now.”

“No, I think they’re serious about it.”

“I didn’t know they could be serious about anything.”

Harry laughed. “Well, I hope they’re serious. I gave them a good bit of money to get them started.”

“Did you really?” she frowned.

“Yeah. Seemed like a good investment.”

They wandered around the edge of the store one more time before Harry finally broached a conversation he’d been worried about, but knew he needed to have with her.

“Er — Cho?”

“Hm?” She immediately lost interest in the deck of Exploding Snap she’d been looking at.

“Maybe… maybe you shouldn’t come to the Three Broomsticks after all.”

She frowned at him. “Why not?” Her voice was cold, like it was when she talked to Cedric.

“It’s not that I don’t want you there,” Harry said hastily. “It’s only that Cedric said he was going to join us, and I didn’t think you’d want to be there if he was there.”

“I go to D.A. meetings even though he’s there, don’t I?”

“That’s… different, isn’t it?”

“If you don’t want me there, if you’d rather be with Cedric and Hermione, you can just say so,” Cho snapped.

“But that’s the opposite of what I’m saying! I do want you there — I just didn’t think you’d want to be there.”

“Well, fine, I don’t have to be there.” Cho glanced at the watch on Harry’s hand. “I’ll see you around, I guess.”
And she left Zonko’s.

Harry stared after her for a moment, thinking back over everything he said. He wasn’t sure at which part he’d gone wrong. He’d tried to be pleasant about it, he’d tried to be reasonable. He’d tried to be considerate of Cho’s feelings, but she’d lashed out at him.

Utterly confused, Harry picked the deck of Exploding Snap up and went to the counter to purchase it. His was starting to get ashy on the edges and needed replacing. He turned his conversation with Cho over during his entire transaction, and on the wet walk to the Three Broomsticks, but he was unable to come to any real conclusion. He felt like there were a lot of things that happened on their date that he hadn’t really understood. Cho had cried a good bit, but she’d also laughed a bit, too.

Harry pushed his way into the Three Broomsticks, crowded as it ever was on a Hogsmeade trip day, perhaps even more so with the rain. He saw Hermione seated at a table in the back corner with the strangest of people: Luna Lovegood and Rita Skeeter.

Harry frowned as Hermione waved him over. He started towards her, then felt someone clap him on the shoulder.

“You made it, Harry,” Cedric said, and when Harry turned, he was looking up at one of Cedric’s grim smiles. “You’re earlier than Hermione said you’d be. Well, are you ready to tell our story?”

Chapter End Notes

comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Seen and Unforseen

Chapter Summary

The repercussions from Harry and Cedric’s interview are felt by students and staff.

Chapter Notes

It’s been so long.... I missed you all, and I missed this story. I could list all 74 reasons I haven’t been able to work on this fic, but I know what you really want is to just read the next chapter. I appreciate how supportive everyone was, checking on me here and on tumblr. It means so much that you care, and I love that you love this story. Thanks for your patience. It really means the world to me.

I’m not in a place to do weekly updates just yet, so be patient with me a little longer. I’ll be putting chapters out as they’re finished.

Thanks to ageofzero for beta’ing.

Thanks to all of you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had not been easy to tell Rita Skeeter everything. Harry did not like her to begin with, and to end with he didn’t want to talk to anyone about what had happened in the graveyard. It did not help that Rita Skeeter really didn’t ask her questions any more politely or with any more sensitivity, Harry knew Hermione had been right to arrange this. Especially after the escape of so many Death Eaters, people needed to know the truth. Maybe they would think he was a nutter because it was being published in *The Quibbler*, but maybe some people would believe him. This was something he could do for the Order. This was something Harry could do to fight back.

It had helped, too, to have had Cedric there. For all that Harry was angry with Cedric over, for all the arguments he and Cedric had had about what to do now that Voldemort had returned, Harry was so glad to have Cedric finally fighting with him.

Luna told Harry and Cedric that it might be another month before her father could print it, but she’d let him know when it was done. There was a piece on a Crumple-Horned Snorkack that just had to get to press, but perhaps there would be room for the interview in the next issue.

Harry wasn’t sure if he should tell his parents about the interview. There was the off chance none of them would even see it, as it was being published in a magazine that was regarded as little more than a joke at best. He also knew, though, if word made it back to Umbridge, there would be hell to pay, and his mother would be prepared for that.
“I still think it’s a good thing you told,” said Neville, who may not have been privy to Lily’s outburst over Umbridge at Christmastime, but something that dramatic surely made its way around the other families in the Order. “My mum would be upset, too, but it’s something that’s worth it, isn’t it?”

Harry poured himself a glass of orange juice. “I guess so. If anyone reads it.”

“People will read it,” Hermione insisted, though her face did not look as hopeful as her words. That probably had more to do with the *Daily Prophet* in her hands, which still had not offered a sufficient explanation for the breakout from Azkaban, other than to point fingers at Regulus Black. “They’ll want a better story than what they’re getting fed.”

A hand clapped Harry on the back as he took a sip of his orange juice. He tried not to choke and looked up at Cedric Diggory.

“Morning, Harry,” he said. “Happy Sunday.”

And like that, Cedric was off to the Hufflepuff table. Harry cast a surreptitious glance at Umbridge, her cold toad-like eyes following Cedric all the way to his seat. Cedric must have been right, then, to avoid talking to Harry in public when he was trying to avoid Umbridge’s wrath. It seemed that whatever had spurred Cedric into sharing his story alongside Harry had made him cavalier in the face of Umbridge’s wrath.

Harry got a far colder greeting from Cho, who met him with no words, only an eyeful of daggers as she swept past him for the Ravenclaw table.

“Your date went that badly, did it?” Hermione asked.

Harry pushed his food around. He’d already talked to Sirius about it. Sirius had thought the whole thing hilarious, and that hadn’t been comforting at all. Cho had been pleasant when they talked about Quidditch, and she’d even been supportive when Umbridge and Voldemort had come up in conversation. But she’d been strangely cold in so many other things. Sirius just said that’s how girls were, and there was nothing to glean from over examining it. Harry thought Lily would have a different perspective, but she hadn’t been at Grimmauld Place for him to ask her last night.

Fortunately, Harry was spared talking about Cho as Ron and Ginny slumped into the seats next to him.

“How was Quidditch practice?” he asked.

“A nightmare,” Ron said.

“Oh, come on,” said Hermione, setting her newspaper aside. “Surely it wasn’t that —”

“Yes it was,” said Ginny. “It was appalling. Angelina was nearly in tears by the end of it.”

Neither was in the mood to say much more, and Harry, too, could not help but feel personally victimized by the state of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He would give just about anything to be out there playing again. He wondered if he could get away with helping Angelina coach. Maybe if he was there to help Ron…. He wouldn’t have to be on a broom….

But it was a ridiculous thought. Umbridge would find some way to get him in trouble over it, Harry would get a detention with her, and his mother would come swooping down and pull him out of Hogwarts. Quidditch was worth a lot of things, but it wasn’t worth that fight.
By the time the match on Saturday rolled around, however, Harry was starting to have second thoughts about taking the risk of coaching Ron. The game was miserable. Slope and Kirke were terrible Beaters, hitting their own teammates as often as they hit Bludgers. Ron missed fourteen goals, most of them very easy saves. By the time Ginny caught the Snitch, Harry’s face was buried in his arms. Fred and George let out groans that were mixtures of misery and relief.

“She’s better than I expected she’d be,” George said.

“You did let her steal your broom all last year,” Hermione reminded him.

As the rest of the Gryffindors began to shuffle out of the stadium, Fred said, “Quidditch was about the only thing worth staying for, you know.”

“There are exams coming!” Hermione said.

George yawned.

“We’re not fussed about N.E.W.T.s.” Fred echoed his brother’s yawn. “We fixed those Snackboxes up last week. We’ve got a good clientele.”

“We just need a place,” George said.

“Do you have the money for a shop?”

“Sure.” Fred shrugged his shoulders and stood. “What do you say, Georgie, is it time to finally break Mum’s heart and drop out?”

“We can’t outdo Perce, though.”

“Guess we’ll have to make a show of it.”

Hermione adjusted her Prefect badge as she and Harry followed the twins from the Quidditch pitch, but she did not say a word. She didn’t exactly have any authority to tell students they couldn’t drop out if that’s what they wanted. She could, however, make their lives difficult if they decided to ditch class.

Harry very nearly forgot about the article all together. It was a few weeks later, and the business of mail at breakfast as usual. Harry did not even look for Hedwig; there was no need for letters, coded or otherwise anymore, not when he had the mirror. The only owl that graced his area of the table was one for Hermione, bearing the daily newspaper. She paid the owl and opened the Daily Prophet. Harry noticed several more students had begun receiving the Daily Prophet as of late. It was an unfortunate time to be in; everyone wanted news about what was happening outside school. Other students were starting to worry about the safety of their families, the way Harry, Ron, and Neville had been worrying all year.

An unfamiliar owl swooped down over their table and dropped a letter into Harry’s eggs. He picked it up and frowned at the hand writing. It didn’t belong to his parents, and was too sloppy to belong to Remus, Regulus, or even Sirius. But it was certainly his name on the front of it.

Before Harry could open it, several more letters dropped into his breakfast. It wasn’t long before he had a small pile of mail, and owls were still adding to it.

“What’s going on?” Ron reached for one of the letters, examining the front and back like it might
have answers for him that Harry couldn’t see.

“No idea.” Harry scanned the pile for a letter from someone in his family, but not a single address was written in familiar handwriting.

“I know what this is!” Hermione said. She reached into the pile and pulled out a brown paper package, still attached to a screech owl who had been buried under the deliveries. “Open this one first.”

Harry detached the package and the owl flew out of Hermione’s hands. He pulled on the brown string, and as the wrappings fell away, the March edition of *The Quibbler* unrolled in his hands. His own face stared back at him, looking a little shy. Cedric was behind him, hand on his shoulder, looking at the reader with surety. Harry felt it made him look rather small.

The title ran across the top of the magazine:


Harry remembered when Rita Skeeter had written about the Triwizard Tournament she had conveniently left out Cedric. He wondered how Cedric felt about being left out of the title this time.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Luna was suddenly looking over his shoulder. She slipped onto the Gryffindor bench between Fred and Ron. “It came out yesterday. I asked Dad to send you and Cedric a copy. I expect the rest of these are letters from readers.”

Harry looked over to the Hufflepuff table where Cedric, too, was sitting in a similar, albeit smaller, pile of mail.

“That’s what I thought!” said Hermione. “Harry, do you mind if we —”

“Help yourself,” said Harry, and waved his hand at the pile dismissively. He had little interest in what the world thought of him. He’d gotten the word about Voldemort out as best as he could. What people did with the information now was up to them.

He listened with half of his attention to Hermione, Ron, Fred, and George sorting through the letters. Some sounded positive, people convinced by Harry’s story, knowing the *Prophet* had been delivering half-truths to the public. Others wrote simply to call him a nutter. Some even wrote just to say they didn’t know what to think.

Harry slipped away as unobtrusively as he could, and went to sit beside Cedric at the Hufflepuff table. The two Hufflepuff Beaters were going through Cedric’s mail, making a pile of positive letters for Cedric to read and keep for himself, and another pile to be binned without Cedric ever setting eyes on it.

“They won’t let me go through my own mail,” Cedric said, but he was grinning. It was a wider smile than Harry had seen on Cedric’s face since he’d been named a Triwizard Champion.

“You’ve got enough to deal with,” Amber said with a sniff, and set a small pile of letters on fire with her wand.

“Oh, this fellow says he believes you,” Pearl squealed. “‘It seems absurd that the Ministry would cover up such a horrendous event, but it is equally absurd that two upstanding young men would lie about such a horrendous event. I wish you boys both the best in your fight.’ What a gentleman!”
There was a soft hem, hem from behind Harry and Cedric. Harry’s stomach twisted as he turned around; Cedric’s smile did not waver.

“Why have you got all these letters, Mr. Diggory? Mr. Potter, I see your breakfast table is piled up as well.”

The Great Hall seemed suddenly quiet. It was as if all eyes were on Harry and Cedric. Harry cast a brief glance at the staff table, but Dumbledore seemed well engaged with his morning tea and a crossword puzzle.

“Is it against the rules to get mail now?” Pearl asked. Amber’s hand tightened around her wand, but she said nothing.

Umbridge ignored her. “Mr. Diggory, Mr. Potter, I have asked you boys a question.”

Harry knew it was unavoidable. She’d see The Quibbler eventually; it was pointless to keep it a secret.

“We gave an interview,” Harry said. He reached for Cedric’s copy of the journal and handed it to Umbridge. “About what happened to us last June.”

She stared down at it, her pudgy face blooming with reds and purples. “An interview? What do you mean?”

“An interview, Professor,” said Amber with a voice of such clearly false respect Harry heard Fred and George’s proud snickers across the hall, “is where someone asks you questions and you answer them.”

Umbridge gave the girl a sharp glare, then turned her gaze back on Harry and Cedric. “When did you do this?”

“Last Hogsmeade weekend,” Cedric answered. “There’s nothing in the school rules about meeting up with adult acquaintances in town. And our conversations in town —”

“How dare you,” she interrupted, “how could you —” She took a deep breath and smoothed her cardigan. “Mr. Potter, I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. Apparently the message has not sunk in. And Mr. Diggory —”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Professor,” Cedric interrupted, “but are you suggesting that The Quibbler is an accurate source of academic information? That because Harry and I were published in a magazine that is widely considered to be little more than a joke magazine, we’re intentionally spreading false rumors? I’m sorry, Professor, it’s only that you realize this is the same magazine that accused Regulus Black of being a vampire in Transylvania for the last fourteen years, and accused Glad Rags of making their special buttons from basilisk scales. I’m not sure I understand which school rules we broke, or what we did wrong, exactly.”

Umbridge’s face was entirely purple now. “Detention, Mr. Diggory, for a week. Fifty points from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor each.” And she turned on her heel, the Quibbler creasing beneath her vice like grip.

Harry could not believe he had gotten away without a detention. He turned on Cedric. “You did that on purpose! You made her mad at you to forget about me!”

“I’m surprised it worked, honestly.” Cedric took a sip of his orange juice. “You’d better keep your head down, lest she remembers and finds the slightest thing to get you into trouble over.”
“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I think we’re all a little happier without your mother’s wrath coming down on the school. Or did you want to go home tomorrow? If you do, by all means, mouth off to her in class today, but I figured you weren’t quite ready to leave.”

“I wouldn’t tell my mum if I got a detention,” Harry said.

Cedric shrugged. “This way you’re freer for D.A. meetings.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m a Triwizard Champion. I think I can catch up.” He grinned and winked at Harry. It was so strange, like talking to a completely different person than Cedric had been these last few months. He was as lively and friendly as he’d been during the tournament. Harry wondered what the difference was. Maybe Cedric was simply getting better sleep.

Harry’s Mondays were always miserable, but today was full of several perks. Before lunch, a new decree had gone up, banning The Quibbler from school, and threatening any student in possession of the magazine with expulsion.

Hermione seemed positively thrilled by this development.

“What are you so cheery about?” Ron asked, as the boys met up with Hermione after their Divination lesson.

“Don’t you see? If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in this school will read your interview, it was banning it!”

And Hermione seemed to be right. Though Harry did not catch so much of a glimpse of The Quibbler in the castle, everyone seemed to be quoting the interview. Students whispered it in corners and stopped abruptly as Harry came by. But unlike the way things had been after Rita Skeeter published her interview last year, the students did not shun him, or spit his comments back at him with derision. Instead, there were awkward smiles and comforting claps on the shoulder as they passed him in the hallway.

The teachers were still not allowed to discuss anything unrelated to their subject matter, but that didn’t stop Professor Sprout from awarding Harry twenty points for passing her a watering can, nor did it stop Professor Flitwick from slipping him a box of squeaking sugar mice at the end of Charms class.

Professor Umbridge was monitoring Divination when Professor Trelawney broke into sobs and announced that Harry would not suffer an early death, as she had been predicting for two and a half years, but would live to a ripe old age, become Minister of Magic, and have twelve children. Harry was not sure that was much better than an early death.

Umbridge was, of course, furious that the article was making its way around the school. She demanded students turn out their pockets in the hallway, but she did not find even a glimpse of the Quibbler. Students had gone to various lengths to disguise it, making it appear as passages of textbooks or even as blank parchment when it wasn’t being read.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were furious, too, but they didn’t lash out at Harry. They couldn’t. He’d named their fathers as Death Eaters, and they couldn’t say a word about it because that would mean they had read the article.
At dinner, Luna came flouncing up to the Gryffindor table. “No copy of The Quibbler has ever sold out faster! Dad’s reprinting. He can’t believe it. People seem more interested in this than the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.”

Harry was, on one hand, glad people were reading it. Hermione had been right — people were dissatisfied with the Prophet’s report. On the other hand, it would certainly make its way back to his parents.

Seamus sat beside Harry at dinner. He reached across the table for a bread roll and said, “I just wanted to let you know — I believe you, and I’ve sent a copy of that magazine to me mam.” And like that, he was gone with the bread and a pat butter.

The only thing that really brought Harry’s mood down was after dinner. He didn’t know why it bothered him so much, and he honestly didn’t know what to make of it. As he, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny left the Great Hall together, Harry saw Cedric walking up the west staircase with Cho. His stomach turned over once, but it wasn’t the jealousy he’d felt last year when they were dating, not quite. He didn’t quite know what to make of it, honestly. Hadn’t Cedric been the one who had broken up with Cho? But that was the Cedric who had been quiet and rather sullen. This new, cheery Cedric was the one who had dated Cho in the first place.

Harry was so caught up in his confusion that when the portrait to the Common Room swung open and he was greeted with a rousing cheer, he was floored. Fred and George had, of course, organized a celebration, which included hanging an enlarged version of The Quibbler cover on the wall, over one of the tapestries. Harry was flattered, but not particularly impressed. And though he appreciated that everyone was interested in his story, he did not want to sit by the fire and relive what had already been a difficult interview. It was not very long before his scar was prickling and he felt too tired to continue. To the disappointment of several people — none louder than Dennis and Colin Creevey — Harry climbed the stairs to the dormitory.

No one else was there, which he was grateful for. He patted his pocket for the mirror, wondering if he should talk to his parents. It was hard to imagine they hadn’t seen the interview yet, and he knew it would be impossible for them to write him a letter. They would want to talk about it. But there had been a sort of unspoken rule that his parents would never reach out to him on the mirror, because there was no guarantee Harry was away from prying eyes. Whereas if Harry called his parents, at least one of them was bound to be at Grimmauld Place, safe, with the mirror.

In the end, Harry decided to stall the conversation. It could wait at least a night. He was tired, and there was no telling how long he actually had the dormitory to himself.

Harry changed into his pajamas and left his glasses on the bedside table, hoping sleep might make his headache go away. He pulled his bed hangings closed. Though the dormitory was far quieter than the common room, and the closed curtains provided a sense of quiet privacy, the irritation persisted. His stomach, too, began to tighten, and Harry rolled over to try to mitigate some of the discomfort.

The moment he closed his eyes, sleep seemed to snatch him up, and he was thrust headlong into a dream.

The room was dark, windows covered with thick, heavy drapes, not unlike Grimmauld Place, though the ceilings were higher, and the windows stretched to meet them. The room was lit by many, many candles, and Harry caught sight of his own hands, clenching the back of a black velvet chair. But they were not the dark, weathered hands, stained with ink and scarred by Umbridge that Harry was familiar with. They were long, thin, and pale, almost like candlewax, looking as if they might melt if they grew too warm.
In front of Harry, a man in dark robes knelt, head bowed low. “Master, I crave your pardon,” the man pleaded.

“I do not blame you, Rookwood.” Harry felt the vibrations in his throat, but the sound of his voice was unfamiliar. It did not threaten to break, still pushing the limits of adolescence, nor nip with a friendly but sarcastic chime. Instead it was cold, thin, and impossibly cruel.

Harry moved from behind the chair and stood over the man, feeling a good foot taller than he was used to.

“You are sure of your facts, Rookwood?” Harry asked.

“Yes, My Lord, yes,” Rookwood said, still not daring to look up. “I used to work in the department after — after all…..”

“Avery told me Bode would be able to remove it.”

“Bode could never have taken it, Master…. Bode would have known he could not…. Undoubtedly that is why he fought so hard against Malfoy’s Imperius Curse.”

“Stand up, Rookwood.”

The man scrambled to his feet. Harry recognized the man’s pockmarked face from the Daily Prophet as one of the escaped prisoners from Azkaban.

“You have done well to tell me this,” Harry said. “Very well… I have wasted months on fruitless schemes, it seems…. But no matter… We begin again, from now. You have Lord Voldemort’s gratitude, Rookwood.”

“My Lord… yes, My Lord.”

“I shall need you help. I shall need all the information you can give me.”

“Of course, My Lord, of course… anything….”

“Very well… you may go. Send Avery to me.”

Rookwood bowed low and left the room hastily.

Once Rookwood was gone, Harry turned. On the wall hung an old mirror that caught Harry’s reflection, but it was not the reflection Harry was familiar with. As Harry stepped towards the mirror, he expected to see the dim candlelight reveal his dark, messy hair, his mother’s clear green eyes, and a sharp, white scar cutting across a dark forehead.

Instead, his face was white, skull-like in its paleness and baldness, skin clinging tight to its form, stretched over bone and bloodless, with red eyes and slitted pupils.

Harry screamed and thrashed, suddenly tangled up in his own bed curtains, and fell to the floor.

“What — What’s — Harry, will you stop acting like a maniac, and I can get you out of here?” It was Ron’s voice, and Harry felt disjointed, like he had one foot in hot water and the other in cold. He was not entirely sure where he was, until Ron finally wrenched the curtains apart, and he saw Ron, half-undressed, illuminated by the dim moonlight.

Ron helped Harry stand. “Has someone been attacked again?”
“No — everyone’s fine.” Harry reached for the bedside table and felt for his glasses. His forehead burned. “Well, Avery’s not fine. He’s in trouble. He gave him the wrong information…. He’s really angry.” Harry sank on the bed and buried his face in his hands. He wondered if he was imagining Avery’s tortured screams or if part of him was still there, in Voldemort’s head, listening.

“What are you talking about?” Ron sat down next to him and dropped his voice to a whisper. “D’you mean… did you just see You-Know-Who?”

“I was You-Know-Who.” Harry tightened his hand around his bedsheet. His knuckles whitened from the strain, but they were still the dark and rough hands he was familiar with. “He was with Rookwood, one of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban, remember? Rookwood’s just told him Bode couldn’t have done it.”

“Done what?”

“Remove something…. He said Bode would have known he couldn’t have done it…. Bode was under the Imperius Curse…. I think he said Malfoy’s dad put it on him.”

“Bode was bewitched to remove something? But — Harry, that’s got to be —”

“The weapon,” Harry said, “I know.”

“We’ve got to tell the Order.”

Harry, who had already been avoiding his parents’ frustration over the article, did not feel ready to face them with the additional knowledge that his Occlumency lessons were failing. But Ron was right. Harry needed to tell someone what he had just seen. If this was all he could do for the Order right now, he might as well do it.

The door opened, and Dean and Seamus came in, talking quietly. They began getting ready for bed, and Ron, too, got up and resumed changing into his pajamas. Harry poured himself a glass of water and waited until his roommates had washed up and gotten into bed. When he was certain they were finished, he slipped the mirror from the pocket of his robe and went into the bathroom. He turned the water on in the shower to hide the sound of his call and sank down against the wall.

Reluctantly, Harry looked in the mirror. A knot in his stomach loosened at the sight of his own face: dark skin, green eyes, messy black hair, and lighting bolt scar. All of it was as it should be.

“Mum — Dad?” he said into the mirror. As his breath misted across the glass, Harry’s face disappeared. The surface of the mirror was now black, but Harry was used to this. It was usually inside someone’s coat pocket. “Mum? Dad? Sirius?” he tried again.

A spot of light interrupted the darkness and in a moment, Harry was looking at Remus’s face. Harry realized immediately that Remus was exactly who he needed to speak with. He would not have to fear facing his parents’ disappointment over the article nor his Occlumency lessons. He would get the most honest answers he could ask for.

“Hello, Harry,” said Remus. “Your parents and Sirius are all out for the evening. Is everything alright?”

Remus looked thinner than usual, and dark circles rimmed his eyes. Harry wondered briefly if they were nearing the full moon, but he was fairly certain from his Astronomy class that this week was in the dark moon phase.

“I’m okay,” Harry said. “Are you alright?”
“Yes, everything is fairly quiet here.” Remus took a sip of tea. “I saw your interview this afternoon.”

“Oh. What did you think?”

“You and Cedric seemed very well-spoken. I’m impressed. It seems you’ve done an incredibly brave thing.”

“Thanks. Have Mum and Dad seen it?”

“No, or at least, not since I’ve seen them. They’re expected back tomorrow morning. Did you want to talk to them about it?”

“No, no. Really… I’d rather not.”

Remus smiled. “I expect Umbridge is upset.” His smile dropped as he added, “Did you get into trouble with her over it?”

“Sort of,” Harry said. “Cedric managed to take the worst of it. I didn’t get a detention at all. I don’t know why he did it.”

“I expect Cedric thinks you’ve been through enough. We all want to do our part for each other.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. He ran his hand through his hair, and as he brushed his scar, he remembered the original purpose of the call. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. I had another dream.” And he told Remus everything.

It was easier, in some ways, than talking to his parents. Remus listened very well. His face did not twist into worry or hurt the way his mother’s would have; there were no concerned frowns like the ones that would have creased James’s face. He merely took the information as Harry gave it to him, and when Harry was done, he spoke calmly and clearly.

“I suppose this isn’t very good news.”

“Voldemort knows where the weapon is,” said Harry, “and how to get it. How long do you think it will be before makes his move? Are Mum and Dad alright wherever they are? And Sirius?”

“I think your parents and Sirius are fine. I’ll tell them what you’ve just told me, of course. I know they’ll be worried about you, so if you can call again tomorrow, I know they’d appreciate it.”

Harry pulled his knees up against his chest. “They’ll only tell me to try harder at Occlumency.”

“There’s some truth in that. It’s not a good situation when your own mind is unsafe. Every moment you are unprotected is a moment you can be manipulated or controlled by Voldemort.” Remus’s jaw tightened. “Harry — listen, very carefully. I need you to promise me something. Your mum and dad will probably make you do it over again, but it will put me at ease to hear it from you.”

“I’ll do better at Occlumency, it’s just that Snape —”

“No, Harry, this isn’t about that. Please, I need you to promise me not to leave Hogwarts.”

“You mean — stay inside? Like last year, after Mr. Crouch was attacked? Uncle Remus, I —”

“The grounds, I’m sure, are as safe as they’ve ever been, if not more so. Dumbledore is sparing no measure of security to keep all of you safe. But promise me you won’t leave the grounds, for anything. No trips into Hogsmeade, no sneaking out to the Shrieking Shack, anything like that.”

Remus let out a long, slow sigh. “Harry, I wish I could tell you. Can you trust me that it’s for your own safety? And for the safety of the Order?”

Harry tried not to sound dismal as he said, “Yeah, I promise. Could you at least answer one question for me?”

“Maybe, but —”

“If I can learn Occlumency, and if I’m good at it, would you tell me then why I can’t go into Hogsmeade anymore?”

“Harry, that’s a moot point. If you were making strides in Occlumency, you wouldn’t have had the dream, and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“So you wouldn’t tell me either way, you mean. Aren’t I safer — aren’t we all safer — because of what I just saw? It helps us, doesn’t it?”

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. “Of course it helps, but what we truly want is to know that you’re protected, Harry.”

“But if what I’m seeing is useful, if it helps the Order —”

“You know your mother would sacrifice the Order if it meant seeing you safe,” Remus said. “We all care very much for you, Harry, so please, do as we ask, and do your best in Occlumency.”

Harry agreed reluctantly and wished Remus good night. He left the mirror on the floor of the bathroom and buried his face into his hands. His scar hurt terribly. He had never fought with Remus before, certainly not like that. He replayed the conversation in his head, and though he felt like he was in the right, he also felt like he was behaving like a sulky child. What was happening to him?

There was a knock on the door and Harry turned the shower water off. “Nearly done,” he said.

“’Kay,” said a tired Neville.

—— —— ——

While the moon waxed into fullness over the next two weeks, Harry’s days grew steadily worse. He spoke to his parents about his dream and interview briefly. They made him promise, as Remus had said they would, to stay on Hogwarts grounds, no matter what. James, too, made him repeat his promise that if he got a detention with Umbridge he would tell them. Harry agreed, despite the guilt in his stomach. He so rarely lied directly to his parents.

As Cedric had predicted, Umbridge found the smallest slight to punish Harry with. He turned in notes from the Defense textbook “incorrectly,” and was saddled with another detention. He thought maybe for this she’d make him write, “I must do my homework right,” on top of the scars he already had, but she did not seem interested in changing her tune. By the end of the evening, Harry’s white scars were pink from the fresh wound.

The moment of his lie replayed in his memory as Harry dropped to his knees on the floor of Snape’s office. The pain was sharp, and it forced Harry back into the present. He pressed his hand to his forehead, trying to force out the ache in his scar.
“That last memory,” said Snape, “what was it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. It all blurred together after so many failed attempts to repulse Snape. “Talking to my Mum about Umbridge?”

“No, I mean the one concerning a man kneeling in the middle of a darkened room.”

“Oh — it’s nothing — sir.”

Snape frowned down at him, and Harry turned his gaze on the stone floor as he pushed himself back up to his feet.

“How do that man and that room come to be inside your head, Potter?”

“It —” Harry cast about the room for any sort of object he could look at, something that wasn’t Snape, something that might give him the strength to lie. “It was just a dream I had.”

“A dream.”

Harry bit back a retort about repeating things. It would not do to make Snape angrier, not when he had to be subjected to his mind being opened up over and over again this evening.

“You do know why we are here, don’t you, Potter?” said Snape. “You know why I am giving up my evenings to this tedious job?”

Harry almost answered no. “Yes.”

“Remind me why we are here, Potter.”

“So I can learn Occlumency.” Harry tightened his hand around his wand and stared down at his shoes.

“Correct, Potter. And dim though you may be, I would have thought that after two months’ worth of lessons you might have made some progress. How many other dreams about the Dark Lord have you had?”

Harry thought of the long, dark corridor he walked down every night, of the flashes of a large, stately manor, of Death Eaters in various states of cowing and torture. “Just the one.”

“Perhaps,” Snape said in a long drawl, “perhaps you enjoy having these visions and dreams, Potter. Maybe they make you feel special, important.”

Harry knew Snape had seen the memory of his conversation with Remus, but he thought twisting his desire to be useful to the Order was wholly unfair. “No.”

“That is just as well, Potter, because you are neither special, nor important. It is not up to you to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters.”

“No, that’s your job, isn’t it?” Harry had not meant to reply so sharply, but he found himself unable to restrain his frustrations any longer.

Snape, however, almost looked amused. “Yes, that is my job. Now, if you are ready, we will start again.” He did not wait for Harry to confirm he was ready. He raised his wand and said, “Legilimens!”

Harry was thrust into the memory of his near death at the hands of the dementors two years earlier.
He saw Regulus and Sirius nearly dying, too, as hundreds of dementors swooped down over them, ready to suck out their souls.

But, as Harry concentrated, he seemed to be in two places at once. He could see the dementors, but he could also see Snape in front of him. It was like when he woke fresh from a dream, one foot still in that corridor and one in his bedroom. Harry tightened his jaw and his resolve. He raised his wand and said, “Protego!”

There was a flash of silver and white. Snape’s wand flew from his grasp and he staggered backwards. Harry’s mind was filled with unfamiliar memories — a loud, hook-nosed man shouted at a frail-looking woman, while a young boy with greasy black hair cried in a corner — a boy looked panic-stricken as a young red-headed girl glared him down while a brunette in a flowered dress cried and held her shoulder — a girl laughed as a scrawny boy tried to mount a bucking broomstick —

“Enough!”

Harry was forced backwards, but managed to stay on his feet. In front of him, Snape was shaking, and his pale face seemed drained of blood entirely.

“Well, Potter….” His breathing came slow and heavy. “That was certainly an improvement.” He walked over to the stone basin where he stored a set of memories before each session. He gripped the sides of the Pensieve and looked down to where the silver wisps swirled. “I don’t remember telling you to use a Shield Charm, but there is no doubt that it was effective.”

Harry could not be sure if that was a compliment or not. He had succeeded, done what Snape expected of him, but he knew he had done something Snape had not expected, and he was about to be punished for it. It was moments like this where Harry thought he might hate Snape more than Umbridge.

“Let’s try again, shall we?”

Harry had barely moved back into position when Snape said, “Legilimens!” Harry’s unprepared mind was assaulted, almost as if it had cracked open, and Harry was running down the dark corridor in the Department of Mysteries. He ran towards the door, moving so quickly he was certain he would run headlong into it. But before he reached it, the door flew open, and he saw blue flames lighting a circular room with more doors. He wanted to keep going, but he did not know which door to take.

“Potter!”

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Snape’s office. Had he just collapsed? Been thrust backwards? He did not remember. He felt as exhausted as if he truly had just been running down the lengthy corridor. His breath was short and his throat burned.

“Explain yourself,” Snape said, and came to stand over Harry.

Harry sat up and rubbed the growing bump on the back of his head. “I… I don’t know what happened — sir. I’ve never seen that before. I mean, I told you about the door, but it’s never opened before.”

“You are not working hard enough!”

Harry could not understand Snape’s frustration. It was just a hallway, just a door. He was not even certain the dream was real. How could Voldemort be in the Department of Mysteries and not get
“You are lazy and sloppy, Potter. It is small wonder that the Dark Lord so easily puts —”

“Hey, I have a question — sir.” Harry pushed himself to his feet. “Why do you call Voldemort the Dark Lord? I’ve only ever heard Death Eaters call him that.”

Snape’s upper lip curled, and Harry prepared himself for the inevitable retaliation. Before Snape could speak, they were interrupted by a woman’s scream.

Snape and Harry both looked upward. The sounds of shuffling could be heard in the halls above, commotion almost as loud as that of a period between classes.

“Did you see anything unusual on your way down here, Potter?”

Harry had not.

There was another scream. Snape adjusted his wand in his hand and strode quickly to the door. Harry followed.

They followed the noise to the entrance hall. Students were coming from the corridors, though most had come from finishing dinner in the Great Hall. The crowd had gathered on the marble staircases, in between suits of armor — anywhere there was standing room.

Harry pushed his way forward to the edge of a wide circle where no one dared move closer. Directly across the empty space, Harry saw Professor McGonagall, looking pale. Her jaw was clamped down so tightly, Harry thought she might be sick.

In the center of the empty ring stood Professor Trelawney, wand drawn, and an empty bottle of sherry at her side. Her trunks lay at her feet, tipped over as if they had been thrown down the stairs. Trelawney stumbled backwards, eyes magnified by her glasses and staring at the foot of the staircase. She let out a scream that choked off into a sob.

“No! This cannot be happening — It cannot! I refuse to accept it!”

“You didn’t realize this was coming?”

Harry craned his neck around a stout Ravenclaw to see Professor Umbridge standing across from Trelawney. She looked pleased with herself. There was no sympathy for Trelawney’s distress.

“Incapable though you are of predicting even tomorrow’s weather, you must surely have realized that your pitiful performance during my inspections, and lack of any improvement, would make it inevitable that you would be sacked?”

“You c-can’t!” Trelawney’s sobs echoed in the hall. “You can’t sack me! I’ve b-been here sixteen years! H-Hogwarts is m-my h-home!”

“It was your home, until an hour ago,” Umbridge proudly produced a parchment with the Minister’s seal on it, “when the Minister of Magic countersigned the order for your dismissal. Now, kindly remove yourself from this hall. You are embarrassing us.”

Harry thought the only person who was an embarrassment was Umbridge. She stood at the center of the crowd, smiling as if she had just completed her good deed for the day. She either did not know or did not care that some of the students around her had begun to cry. Harry saw Pavarti hand Lavender a handkerchief. Two Ravenclaws had their hands over their faces and tears streaked their
cheeks.

The sound of crying was broken as footsteps now echoed through the hall. Professor McGonagall had broken the circle and strode to Trelawney’s side. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket.

“There, there, Sibyll… Calm down. Blow your nose on this. It’s not as bad as you think, now. You are not going to have to leave Hogwarts.”

“Oh?” said Umbridge, in her high-pitched voice, full of false cheer and dripping with a threat. She took a step closer. “And your authority for that statement is…?”

The oak doors swung open. “That would be mine,” Dumbledore’s voice called out through the foyer of the castle. Students parted quickly, making way for Dumbledore as he strode towards Trelawney and McGonagall. Harry felt suddenly at peace, watching Dumbledore take the situation in hand and put Umbridge in her place. Perhaps Dumbledore had been unable to do anything for Harry when it came to Quidditch and detentions, but this, at least, it seemed Dumbledore had well in hand.

“Yours, Professor Dumbledore?” Umbridge said with her girlish laugh. “I’m afraid you do not understand the position. I have here,” she waved her parchment once more, “an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister of Magic. Under the terms of Educational Decree Number Twenty-Three, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts has the power to inspect, place upon probation, and sack any teacher she — that is to say, I — feel is not performing up to the standard required by the Ministry of Magic. I have decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dismissed her.”

Dumbledore seemed unperturbed by this speech. His smile remained fixed and calm. He bent down and straightened one of Trelawney’s trunks. He put a comforting hand on Trelawney’s shoulder and said to Umbridge, “You are quite right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor, you have every right to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away. I am afraid that power still resides with the headmaster, and it is my wish that Professor Trelawney continue to live at Hogwarts.”

Trelawney hiccuped loudly. “No — No, I’ll g-go, Dumbledore! I sh-shall l-leave Hogwarts and s-seek my fortune elsewhere.”

“No.”

Harry was startled by the abruptness in Dumbledore’s voice, after he had been so calm a moment ago. But the sharpness was brief.

“It is my wish that you remain, Sibyll.” Dumbledore turned to Professor McGonagall. “Might I ask you to escort Sibyll back upstairs, Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course. Come now, Sibyll.” McGonagall offered Trelawney an arm to lean on and helped guide her past Umbridge. Professor Sprout hurried forward as well, and the two women led her through the crowd of students who, though they let the teachers pass, seemed reluctant to risk missing a moment of the power struggle between Umbridge and Dumbledore.

“And what,” Umbridge said in a tight whisper, “are you going to do with her once I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?”

Dumbledore’s smile remained firm. “That won’t be a problem. You see, I have already found us a new divination teacher, and he will prefer lodgings on the ground floor.”
“You’ve found — You’ve found?” Umbridge’s already girlish voice jumped several notes, nearly into the realm of Banshee. “Might I remind you, Dumbledore, that under Educational Decree Twenty-two —”

“— the Ministry has the right to appoint a suitable candidate if — and only if — the headmaster is unable to find one. And I am happy to say that on this occasion I have succeeded. May I introduce you?”

Dumbledore turned to face the still open doors to the entrance hall. Instead of the sound of approaching footsteps, there was the sound of hooves. The evening mist made the approaching shape vague, and for a moment, Harry thought it was a man on horseback. As the new Divination teacher strode into the hall, Harry recognized him immediately.

“This is Firenze,” said Dumbledore. Harry was sure his voice was not just pleased, but absolutely cheery. “I think you’ll find him suitable.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated.
Cedric woke with a start at 4:42 in the morning, heart pounding in his chest and breath coming quick, as if he’d been trying to outpace a hippogriff instead of fast asleep. He could not remember his dream. The only remnant of his nightmare was a sharp feeling of terror and a metallic taste in his mouth. He took a moment to orient himself, to slow his breathing and calm his nerves. Though he managed to bring himself down from the edge of panic, he knew from experience that there was little chance of falling back asleep.

Cedric grabbed his wand and attempted to cast *Lumos* wordlessly, but his brain was too addled to focus. So instead, he whispered the incantation, and with his other hand he shielded the light from his roommate’s beds. He held his light up to the small bookshelf beside his bed. Cedric pulled free his Herbology book, tucked between the furry spine of his *Monster Book of Monsters* and the uncracked spine of his Defense Against the Dark Arts book.

Cedric took his book into the warm and cozy common room, where he settled into a coveted plush beside the dim, glowing embers of the fire. This late at night, the only sounds were the crackling of the wood as it popped from the heat and the quiet purrs of a few cats, tucked away in some of the nooks of the common room. No one was up studying this late; Hufflepuffs were hard workers, but they valued their health. The prefects encouraged everyone to get a good night’s sleep. All-nighters were rarities here — except for Cedric. His own prefect badge rested on his bedside table more often than his chest these days.

Cedric thumbed the well-worn book aimlessly. Herbology was hardly the subject he was struggling in, so there was no section in particular he felt compelled to study. His Runes class and Defense class, however, were wholly different.

“Your N.E.W.T.s are this summer,” Professor Sprout had said. “I don’t want to see you throw
away all the hard work you’ve done. And you are still a prefect. You ought to be setting an example for the other students. If you aren’t careful, you’ll lose your position.”

None of that had made Cedric feel better about sitting in a classroom for several hours a day, doing nothing important — not when he had the option to lie awake in his bed doing nothing important.

Even here, in the warm, cozy space of the common room, rest eluded Cedric. He stared at his Herbology book without taking in any information. It was only a few dismal hours before the common room began to fill: first with students finishing up homework, then with students who wanted an early breakfast. By eight am, most of the Hufflepuffs were already down to the Great Hall or finishing up homework; a few late risers were the only exceptions.

Amber Lais came up the stairs before her sister. She merely had to raise her eyebrow at him and he knew she was telling him to get his ass downstairs to get dressed. With a weary smile, Cedric disappeared back to his own dormitory to change out of his pajamas and get ready for the day. Amber used to tell him she didn’t care what he did with his day. If he wanted to laze about the common room in his pajamas, that was his business. But this last month they’d been working together to limit those days.

Amber had been close with Cedric since they’d started at Hogwarts together, seven years ago. They’d been good friends, as most Quidditch players are, and had nearly every class together. She played as a Beater in Quidditch, and she preferred to face most problems by whacking them with a bat towards someone else. It had made her excellent to have around when people started asking Cedric questions about the night in the graveyard.

Distinctly, Cedric’s favorite memory of this was when Cadwallader had asked him, “But did you see You-Know-Who? Like, did you really see him?”

And Amber had snapped, “He couldn’t be sure because it’s hard to tell You-Know-Who apart from your Mum sometimes, what with all the warts.”

Cedric returned to the common room, dressed, teeth brushed, and face washed. Amber twisted her mouth to the side and reached up to flatten his hair. She was a good foot shorter than him, and her attempt made him laugh.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It looks fine.”

“You look like you just woke up.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Because you didn’t sleep?”

“I slept a little.”

For a moment, she looked like she would scold him, but she must have changed her mind. “Are you going to Defense today?”

Cedric flexed his right hand. The back of it was a weary red now, the thin scratches were unreadable, but two weeks ago, “I must not tell lies,” had burned rather brightly against his skin. “I suppose I should,” he said. “Umbridge has been after me ever since that interview.”

“She thought she had you cowed until you went and did that,” Amber agreed, no hint of guilt in her voice.
It was Amber who had convinced Cedric to do the interview in the first place. She knew he’d made the right choice, and she would not give Cedric cause to regret it.

Back in February, Amber had overheard Hermione’s plea to Cedric to interview with Rita Skeeter, to share his side of the story, and when he had politely declined, Amber took him into Hogsmeade to make him talk. Cedric still wished she’d chosen somewhere that wasn’t Madam Puddifoot’s, somewhere that Harry wouldn’t have shown up with Cho Chang, but that wasn’t Amber’s fault, really.

“I know you want to help and fight back,” Amber had said to him. “That’s why you asked Pearl and I to join the D.A. with you, isn’t it? So why won’t you do this?”

“I don’t see the point,” he’d said. “Rita Skeeter’s a terrible person, who will twist whatever we say. And the Quibbler? Who would take us seriously?”

Amber stirred her coffee with her cinnamon stick. “Hermione’s a smart girl. If she thinks this will work, I’m sure she has good reasoning for it. Are you really going to let Harry do that interview alone, then?”

“He’s been doing fine without me so far.”

Amber snorted. Cedric was familiar with her temper, but it was rare for him to be on the wrong end of it.

“He’s not doing fine, and I think you know that better than me. You want to fight, I know you do, so why won’t you?”

Cedric had watched Harry fight all year, and to Cedric, that meant Harry was doing alright. Cedric struggled to find the strength to get out of bed most days, while Harry railed against Umbridge, despite how little power any of them had against her. It was a strength Cedric envied.

“What’s the point in trying if it won’t do any good?” Cedric had said. “Nothing will change; Umbridge will still be awful, the Ministry still won’t believe us, and Dumbledore will still have to work in secrecy. Whatever Harry has that lets him fight, knowing all that, I don’t have it.”

That was when Cho and Harry had walked in, and Cedric and Amber had sat in silence for quite a while afterwards.

Finally, Amber had finally said, “I think that Harry fights because he has no choice. He knows it won’t do any good, but he does it because he couldn’t live otherwise. He knows what is right, and he has to hold true to that. I’ve known you since first year, and I know that you’re the same. You’re afraid of failing and being useless, but you’re letting it paralyze you instead of motivate you. I don’t think it’ll be easier, but I think you’ll be happier if you start fighting back.”

Cedric had not agreed with everything Amber had said. She’d made it sound like he chose to be afraid, like it was something he could help. But she’d been right that it was his choice not to act. He’d made any number of excuses for himself — if he fought it would be worse for Harry, his parents, or the Order. But Amber had said almost exactly what Harry had said back in September.

“No — this isn’t fair! It isn’t right, and you know it!”

“Of course I know it, Harry. But there’s nothing we can do right now.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t want to do anything.”

Between Amber and Harry, Cedric had finally accepted that he needed to start fighting back.

The interview had not been easy, but he had done it. And when it came time for Umbridge to find
out what he had done, Cedric had stood between her wrath and Harry. He owed it to Harry, for keeping his mouth shut for so long. His interview might have consequences for his parents, but at this point, with Death Eaters out of Azkaban, it was too late for complete secrecy. And since then, Cedric had done his best to keep fighting. There were good days and bad days, easy days and hard days. He wasn’t sure which today was going to be just yet.

As they started upstairs to breakfast, Amber glanced at Cedric’s uniform. “You’re not wearing your badge today, though.”

“Hm? Oh, guess I forgot again.”

“You don’t want to be on the wrong side of Umbridge and Marston. Even Troy is talking about taking your badge.”

Cedric shrugged. He probably deserved to have his badge stripped. The Head Boy and Head Girl had been patient with him for about a month, but after that, they’d become short with him for not meeting the standards of a prefect.

“We understand you went through an ordeal of some sort,” Britta Marston had said at Halloween, “but you have duties that need attending to. You were chosen for this job because you’re responsible. Can’t you behave responsibly?”

Cedric had promised her he was doing his best. The trouble was he found prefect duties, just like class and Quidditch, a waste of time. The only thing Cedric wanted to devote any energy to was the D.A. It was the only thing that made him feel like he was fighting.

“Good morning, Cedric!” a voice called as they reached the main floor of the castle. Cho Chang was just coming down the stairs from Ravenclaw Tower.

Cedric smiled up at her and waved politely. He remembered how just a year ago an exchange like this would have made his stomach tighten and his heart race. He remembered being flooded with warmth every time Cho smiled. Now, though, it seemed as though his insides had stopped working. He felt as if he was made of lead.

“Should I go ahead?” Amber asked.

“No — stay.” Cedric was not too keen on being alone with Cho. He appreciated that she no longer hated him after their breakup, but he wasn’t sure what she was after. Ever since his interview with Rita Skeeter had been published, she’d become friendly with him again.

They met at the bottom of the stairs, and he saw her hand slightly reach for his, but he tucked his into his pockets.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said, and adjusted the strap of her bookbag. “Did you do Umbridge’s homework?”

“No.” Cedric considered not going to class after all. He wasn’t keen on taking a detention for not doing his homework. “Did you?”

“Oh — I did.”

“That’s good; it’s better if she doesn’t suspect you of anything.” Cedric grinned at her, and immediately regretted it when Cho’s face flushed at his praise.
Fortunately, they had to separate to eat with their houses. Amber and Cedric joined Pearl Lais and the rest of the Quidditch team. As Cedric started in on a breakfast of plain, buttered toast, he felt something warm in his pocket. He continued eating as if nothing had happened, but he saw Ernie Macmillan and Zacharias Smith check their pockets. Pearl crossed her legs, but did not reach for her coin.

It wasn’t until he was safely away from Umbridge’s cold stare, in the hallway on the way to class, that Cedric and Amber checked their coins. The serial number on his galleon read tonight’s date. It wasn’t a lot of notice, but it was probably better that way.

“Will you go?” Amber asked, slipping her own coin back into her pocket.

“I suppose I should,” Cedric said. “I’m really struggling with creating a corporeal Patronus.”

“You’ll get there.”

Cedric wasn’t too sure. It seemed to him that every time he searched for happy memories, he came up empty handed. He wondered if it would work if he invented some.

“You don’t have to walk me to Runes every morning, you know,” he said, though they were halfway there.

“Since Divination moved downstairs, it’s actually on my way.”

“Oh. How is the new professor?”

“Professor Firenze talks a lot about the unknowability of the future and the inevitability of ignorance. You’d like it a lot.”

“Maybe I’ll ditch Runes and join you. Professor Babbling hardly notices when I’m not there.”

“How would you know if you’re not there?”

Cedric laughed, and hoped he’d remember Amber’s joke when he tried to cast his Patronus tonight.

“See you in Defense,” he said, stopping at the door to the Runes classroom.

Amber glanced over his shoulder. “Is Troy in there? Do I need to punch him today?”

“Don’t punch the Head Boy. I thought you said last week that’s what stray Bludgers were for.”

“Yeah, but Hufflepuff doesn’t play for another two weeks. I’m itching to crack his pompous jaw.”

“I’m right here, if you want to take a shot.” Edmund Troy approached them from the end of the hall, Head Boy badge glittering in the white morning light. He rolled up the sleeves of his robes.

Amber rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her lips. Cedric was afraid she might actually take the challenge. “My arms are literally three times your size, Troy. Besides, should a Head Boy really be brawling in the hallway?”

“You’re right. Ten points from Hufflepuff for threatening the Head Boy.”

“You’re in Ravenclaw. You can’t take points from Hufflepuff.”

“Detention, then. And another if you’re late to class.”
Amber turned down the hall towards Divination. “Sure thing, but who’s going to actually make me go?”

Cedric shook his head. Troy watched her go, a deep frown on his face.

“Well, Diggory, it’s good to see you in class for once,” he said, though he sounded displeased.

Cedric tried not to take it personally as he took his seat in the back of the Runes classroom. Professor Babbling did not comment on his presence, though she must have noticed. Runes was not an especially popular class at N.E.W.T. level. There were only three Ravenclaw students, including Troy, and two Slytherins that Cedric wasn’t friends with.

Professor Babbling conjured an artefact for them to work with, and Cedric worked for the hour to finish a rubbing of the piece. Their homework was translation. He felt certain he wouldn’t finish it, especially not with a D.A. meeting to devote his evening to.

As the bell rang, he folded his rubbing carefully and tucked it into his bag between his Charms book of spells and his Herbology text, where he hoped it wouldn’t wrinkle.

“Are you actually going to Defense this afternoon?” Troy asked, handing Cedric his dictionary of Runes. “Or should I write you the detention for ditching now?”

Cedric tried for a friendly smile as they walked out of the classroom together. “You’re always telling me to set a good example as a prefect. Shouldn’t Head Boys be inspiring and encouraging?”

Troy’s face flushed with either anger or embarrassment. “I’m just — you know you need to get your act together, Diggory.”

“Thanks, Mum, I’ll do my best. Now, us ‘Puffs have Charms, so can I go, or do I need to wait for you to write me a detention for being late to that, too?”

“Liste —”

“Hey, Troy,” Amber shouted down the hall. “Bugger off to whatever crack you crawled out of. Accio Bludger.”

Troy ducked needlessly and disappeared around a corner with a shout.

Amber snorted and adjusted her grip on her wand. “Academics. All bark. Unbelievable.”

Cedric laughed. “You didn’t have to threaten him like that.” As she reached him, he continued walking with her towards Flitwick’s class. “He wasn’t being unreasonable — well, he was being a little unreasonable, but he’s just a pompous brat with insecurity issues, no different than Zach or Ernie. You don’t have to throw Bludgers at every one of my battles for me.”

“If you’re going to sit there and take his hippogriff shit, then yeah, I do.”

“I was sassing back.”

“That’s an improvement. Just hex him next time.”

“I’m not going to hex the Head Boy.”

“Threaten to hex him.”

“Didn’t you just tell me last week that I shouldn’t make threats I can’t follow through on?”
“That was you, in a foul mood, threatening to drop out of school. But, generally, yeah, if you’re going to threaten to hex someone, you should probably be willing to follow through with it. So we’re back to my first argument: Hex him.”

Cedric rolled his eyes. He was all for fighting back, but he wasn’t sure Amber’s way was going to work. He couldn’t throw a Bludger at Umbridge or Voldemort.

Charms was a generally pleasant class. Because very few students stopped taking their Charms after O.W.L.s, students remained with their houses, unlike more difficult or specialized subjects like Potions or Runes. So it was a room of students in yellow and black, and none of them looked down on Cedric for shirking prefect duties or ditching class.

Professor Flitwick was a good teacher, who was understanding of Cedric’s situation, and had been especially generous since the interview had been published. Still, Cedric’s stomach dropped when he was called up to Flitwick’s desk once the other students had been set to their practical work.

“Sit, Mr. Diggory,” he said in his high, squeaky voice, and gestured to a plush chair.

The chair looked comfortable, but Cedric certainly didn’t feel comfortable as he sat down.

“Your N.E.W.T.s are in just a couple of months.”

“I know, Professor.”

“And you won’t do well if you can’t get the hang of this silent spell-casting.”

“I know, Professor.”

“Good. Then let’s start at the beginning.”

Cedric did his best while Flitwick walked him through the most basic charms and asked Cedric to cast them silently. This individualized attention, while well-intentioned, was not particularly helpful. Cedric would have preferred being given a list of instructions and being sent off to practice by himself.

In class, most students were progressing from Decaying Charms into Revival Charms. Cedric was still struggling with the former. He could get it, mostly, if he was allowed to verbalize the spell. But this was seventh year, now, and the expectations were high in all of his classes — Defense Against the Dark Arts being the exception.

All they were doing in Defense Against the Dark Arts was reading a textbook on theory. Britta Marston had anxiously asked Umbridge at the beginning of the year when they would get to practice defensive spells, and Umbridge had, in her own circuitous and evasive way, told them they were never going to be using magic in her classroom.

Britta Marston would have probably loved the D.A., if it weren’t full of rowdy Gryffindors and if it weren’t completely against the rules.

When the bell rang for lunch, Cedric could have leapt up in relief. “Thanks, Professor Flitwick,” he said, in a bit of a rush, and met Amber at the door.

The walk down to lunch felt longer than usual. They’d just turned a corner into the foyer of the castle when Cedric said, “Maybe I’ll just head downstairs for a nap instead. I could grab a snack from the kitchens on my way up to class if I’m hungry.”
Amber pursed her lips. “You know if you go lie down now, you’re not going to get out of bed until tomorrow.”

Cedric knew she was right. “What’s the point in going to Defense anyway? I’ll have to stare at Umbridge’s face for two hours. Deal with Troy again. Is it worth all that?”

“Do you want another detention with Umbridge?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Cedric didn’t think preferring a nap over Umbridge was stupid. Forcing himself to sit in a room of people he disliked sounded stupid.

As if she sensed his stubbornness, Amber said, “What about the D.A. tonight?”

Reluctantly, Cedric followed her into Great Hall.

Though the Hufflepuff table buzzed with energy, Cedric ate his lunch in silence. He sat with his Quidditch team and smiled politely and Zacharias Smith’s jokes, but did not have anything to contribute. The Hufflepuff Quidditch team always welcomed Cedric when he ate with them, but it was hard to feel like he belonged with them anymore.

Cadwallader had, the first month back at Hogwarts, done his best to cheer Cedric up. He’d spent a couple weeks checking in on Cedric, asking if he was okay, making sure the dormitory was quiet when Cedric tried to nap. Then he’d tried joking with Cedric, tried being a substitute for whatever happiness Cedric was lacking, but none of it had changed anything for Cedric. Eventually, Cadwallader, the rest of Cedric’s dormmates, and his Quidditch team had just stopped trying.

Amber elbowed him in the ribs. “You coming to class?”

Cedric debated which walk was longer — the walk to Defense or the walk to his dormitory.

“I’ll come,” he finally said.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a popular class at N.E.W.T. level, though with such a disjointed education, few actually passed the O.W.L. Despite that, there was a healthy and diverse number of students in the class.

On their walk upstairs, Cedric and Amber were pushed apart by the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, the latter loudly chasing the former for a stolen tarantula. Britta Marston was just ahead of them and she pointed her wand at the twins’ feet. Both stumbled spectacularly and dropped the tarantula. She levitated the spider into Lee Jordan’s hands.

“No running in the hallways,” she snapped at the boys.

“No hexing in the halls either.” Fred pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and dusted off his robes.

Marston ignored him and looked at Lee. “Should I confiscate that tarantula, or is it going to remain tucked into your bag for the entirety of class?”

Lee shrugged. “I mean, I’ll put him in the bag, but if he gets into trouble, that’s his business.”

“If I catch him out of your bag, I will scorch him.”
Amber rolled her eyes. “Marston, you’re not Minister of Magic yet, would you calm down?”

By now they’d all reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Edmund Troy was already waiting at the door, as were Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet.

“It’s locked?” Britta asked, brow furrowed.

“No, we’re just hanging out outside for fun,” Alicia Spinnet said, and leaned against the wall.

“Where’s Johnson?” Troy asked them, then turned to the twins like they might also have an answer.

George raised an eyebrow at him. “We don’t travel in a pack, you know.”

“Yeah, where’re Chang and Edgecombe?” Fred asked. “Do you keep tabs on all your housemates?”

“Sorry, were you taking attendance?” Angelina shouted at him, coming around the corner. “Didn’t realize Umbridge had died and made you our new professor.”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Lee muttered.

Every Gryffindor broke into laughter. Marston and Troy were not amused.

Angelina made herself comfortable against the wall with Katie and Alicia; Amber joined them when they started discussing the Harpies’ latest Quidditch match. Fred and George began debating how long they had to wait for Umbridge before they could be certain class was canceled. Cedric checked his watch. Though class wasn’t due to start for another three minutes, he, too, found himself hoping Umbridge would never show.

Cho Chang came around the corner, walking quickly. She frowned as she approached them, and when she reached Cedric, she asked, “You haven’t seen Marietta have you?”

“Er — no, sorry. She’s usually with you, isn’t she?”

“Yes, I didn’t see her at lunch. I waited, but she didn’t show. I thought she might be here already.” Cho bit down on her lip and did another look around the hallway, as if Marietta might appear suddenly.

“Is everything alright between you?” Cedric hoped that wasn’t too personal a question. He enjoyed being friends with Cho. She was smart, kind, and loved Quidditch. He did not, however, want to lead her on in any accidental way.

“She was very stressed this morning. I’m a bit worried about her.”

“It’s that time of year,” Cedric said. “I’m sure she’ll be alright.”

Cho smiled at him. “Yeah, you’re right.”

There was a lengthy pause, in which Umbridge did not arrive, nor did Cho come up with any meaningful conversation. Cedric glanced to Amber for rescue, but she was in a heated debate over whether Gwenog Jones or Wilda Griffiths was a better player. It was not a conversation she would leave, and it was not a conversation he could join.

Desperate for something other than awkward silence, Cedric said, “You played a good game against Slytherin last week.”
Cho smiled at him. “Thanks. Malfoy’s gotten a lot better as a Seeker. He was pretty terrible his first year playing, but this year I felt like he was actually a challenge.”

Cedric laughed. “I remember. He was a lot of bark and not a lot of bite. I’m glad he’s improving.”

“It was kind of disappointing I didn’t get to play against you.”

“Summerby’s a better player than I am.”

“No — but — I just didn’t realize two years ago was going to be our last game together.”

Cedric suddenly realized this conversation was going somewhere he was unprepared for. He felt a strange mixture of relief and dread when the sound of Umbridge’s quick steps echoed up the hallway.

She was flanked by Adrian Pucey and Graham Montague and smiling in a way that made Cedric’s insides turn.

“Thank you all for waiting, dears,” she said, and opened the door with a quick flick of her wand. “You can leave your homework on my desk. Go ahead and take your seats and get out your books. We’ll be working through chapter fifteen today.”

“Working” was not what Cedric would have called it. Mindless staring at a page without taking in any information was more accurate.

Cedric took his usual place next to Amber. The Head Boy and Girl sat right up front with the Slytherins. The Gryffindors filled in the back. Cho had, at the beginning of the year, selected a seat as far away from Cedric as possible, and now she looked oddly lonely without Marietta Edgecombe beside her.

Umbridge did not remark on Marietta’s absence. She instructed them to read for the class period, then sat down at her desk with a cup of tea.

Cedric stared at his book, then at the empty walls, then briefly at Umbridge, before using his quill to add scratches to the art project he and someone else in this desk had been collaborating on. They’d started with hatch marks on the corners, then these had turned into a series of spirals. Cedric set to work deepening some of the spirals. He thought he should probably feel a little guilty, as he was a prefect, and here he was, defacing school property, but his boredom was far more pressing than his guilt. Besides, it was nothing a Repair Charm wouldn’t fix.

About halfway through class a crumpled paper levitated itself from under his desk and into his lap. Cedric checked that Umbridge’s attention was on correcting homework before unwrapping the paper.

Want to get out of here? We’re pretty sure the Nosebleed Nougat is perfected, if you want to test it out. Free trial, but we aren’t liable if you bleed out.

A purple and orange chew slid from the paper into Cedric’s hand. He guessed by the “WWW” signature the note was from one of the Weasley twins. Cedric, while wishing he could ditch class, wasn’t sure he wanted to break out into an uncontrollable nosebleed. He slipped the chew back into paper and crumpled it up. He stuck it into his bag.

This time, a note bounced off his shoulder and into his lap. He checked to see if Umbridge saw it, but she was stirring sugar into her tea and not looking at the class.
The new note read, *For the love of Merlin, shouldn’t you make something interesting happen in this class? You have a responsibility to your student body as our prefect.* — WWW

Cedric rolled his eyes and crumpled the note again. He threw it backwards over his shoulder.

“Hem. Hem.”

Cedric felt his face pale as if he really had swallowed a Nosebleed Nougat.

“There is to be no passing notes in this class.” Professor Umbridge had her wand out and levitated the crumpled paper from where she’d froze it, halfway between Cedric and George Weasley’s desks, into the waste bin. “Detention tomorrow night, Mr. Diggory.”

“Sorry, Professor,” Cedric said. “Won’t happen again.” At least now, Cedric had a time and place to save his Nosebleed Nougat for.

—— —— ——

That night at the D.A. they continued their work with Patronuses. It was not an easy spell, and some took to it more quickly than others.

Amber and Pearl had both managed to produce corporeal Patronuses: matching cats, though one was a solid, sleek silver, and the other was splotched with subtle changes in the silver like a calico cat’s fur. Neville still struggled to get much more than a silver vapor, but Neville struggled with most spells. Hermione, of course, got it most quickly. Her silver otter swam in a circle around her until Ron’s terrier came bounding after it, knocking Hermione to the ground.

“Harry, I think I’m doing it!” said Seamus. It was his very first meeting. He’d come with Dean and though he’d been uncomfortable for a few minutes, the practice was enough to engage anyone.

“Look — ah, it’s gone — but it was definitely something hairy!”

Cedric watched Cho’s swan glide over her head, preening its feathers, and decided he needed a break. He took a seat in one of the beanbags beside a bookshelf and watched Dennis and Colin Creevey and their Slytherin friends taking turns screwing their faces up tight and shouting the spell. Hugh managed to get a silver wisp out of his wand, and all four children shrieked loudly with excitement and redoubled their own efforts.

“What we really need is a boggart,” Harry said, stepping between students and silver wisps.

“That’s how I learned. I had to conjure a Patronus while the boggart was pretending to be a dementor.”

“But that would be really scary!” said Lavender Brown. She’d come with Parvati Patil. “And I still — I still can’t do it.” She’d only been able to get puffs of silver smoke. She looked enviously at Ginny Weasley’s steady shield.

“Think of something happy,” Harry said. “If it’s not working, try something happier. Let it sort of fill you up, so you can’t think about anything else.”

When he said that, it sounded easy. But in practice, Cedric could not find a single happy moment that overwhelmed him that way. Everything happy, it seemed, was somehow tinged with sadness.

Harry came and sat next to him. “You’re quitting?”

“Taking a break,” Cedric said. “You’ve done really well with everyone, you know.”
“Oh.” Harry’s cheeks turned pink. “Thanks.”

The door opened a few inches, and Harry and Cedric both looked up, surprised to see a house-elf in eight brightly colored socks with a knitted tie ran towards Harry.

“Dobby — what is it?”

Dobby looked up at Harry with wide green eyes. “Harry Potter, sir — she — she’s coming!”

“She — Umbridge? Umbridge is coming here?”

The room suddenly seemed dimmer. Cedric realized everyone’s Patronus had vanished.

Harry looked up at everyone. “Well — what are you all waiting for — Run!”

Cedric thought the slow reaction of the students meant it was unlikely they would do well in a real duel, though he supposed that wasn’t a fair criticism of him. He’d been caught off guard long enough to take a Killing Curse to the chest.

All the students bottlenecked at the door as they struggled to run. Cedric hoped they wouldn’t try to run all the way back to their common rooms. Maybe Ravenclaw students could get away with it, but for Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Slytherins alike, the closest safe havens were the Owlery or the library.

“Harry, come on!” Hermione shouted. “Cedric, hurry!” she was now at the door, squeezing through between Amber and Pearl, both whom were anxiously motioning Cedric towards them.

Cedric and Harry were the last to leave the room. They seemed to have an unspoken understanding with each other — Cedric went left and Harry went right without hesitation or discussion.

Cedric thought he might be close enough to Flitwick’s office. He could pretend he was looking for Charms help. It was a believable lie, considering his grades. He was just in sight of Flitwick’s door when he felt a sudden cold close over his body. His arms snapped to his sides, his legs closed together, and he hit the ground with a loud thud, groan frozen in his throat.

“How try, Diggory. Where do you think you were running off to so fast?”

Cedric could not look up and see who had cursed him, but he recognized Adrian Pucey’s sneer easily enough. Besides, the cheap shot of a Body-Bind Curse seemed fitting for Pucey.

“I’ve got one here, Professor!” Pucey shouted down the corridor.

Cedric felt a tug on his ankles, but his body didn’t move more than a few inches. He wished he could talk back, so he could’ve offered Pucey constructive criticism on how to properly use Locomotion Charms.

It was a few minutes before he heard the quick tapping of Umbridge’s heels. She sounded out of breath as she said, “Well done, Adrian. Well done! This could not have been more perfect — another fifty points to Slytherin. I’ll get him on his feet, not to worry. Check the library for any students out of breath. Draco and Pansy should be checking the bathrooms. Hurry up, now!”

There was a tug on Cedric’s back, and he felt pulled to his feet by an unseen force. The Body-Bind Curse melted away, but a grip on his arm kept him from running. He turned his head — slowly, it was still stiff — and saw Umbridge, holding him and Harry tightly in each hand.
She smiled sweetly. “The two of you should join me on a trip to the headmaster’s office.”

Cedric thought, as Umbridge dragged him and Harry down the corridor, that he and Harry could easily take Umbridge. She hadn’t disarmed him. He adjusted his grip on his wand. He debated between the Stunning Jinx and the Full Body Bind Curse. Then he saw Umbridge’s wand, clutched tightly in the hand that held Harry, its point digging dangerously into Harry’s neck. It would be risky to do anything that might startle her.

Resigned, Cedric let Umbridge carry them upstairs, past the stone gargoyle, and right into Dumbledore’s office.

Cedric was surprised by how crowded the office was. There was Dumbledore, behind his desk, looking like his usual calm self. Professor McGonagall stood beside the desk. Her severe glare at Umbridge softened into concern when she saw Harry and Cedric. The Minister of Magic himself was beside the fire, rocking anxiously on his heels. He had his hands tucked into his pockets and a self-satisfied expression on his face. On either side of the door were two aurors Cedric vaguely recognized. One was Kingsley Shacklebolt, who Cedric had seen come in and out of the Order headquarters frequently over the summer. The other, Cedric hadn’t seen since he was fifteen, at one of his father’s work parties. He thought his name was Dwarvish or something similar. Cedric remembered him for being rather short. The last two people crowding the office were Percy Weasley, parchment and quill in his hand, standing beside a girl who had a scarf pulled up over her face. Cedric was fairly certain she was wearing student’s robe, but he couldn’t tell who she was.

“Well, well, well,” said Cornelius Fudge. He did not sound surprised to see them at all.

“They were running back to their dormitories,” Umbridge said, finally letting the two of them go. “The Malfoy boy and Adrian Pucey cornered them.”

“Did they?” Fudge smiled. “I must remember to tell their fathers. Well, boys, I expect you know why you’re here?”

“Ye—” Harry started, but Cedric cut him off.

“No, sir.”

“No?” Fudge repeated. “I beg your pardon?”

“No,” Cedric repeated.

“Yeah, I don’t know what’s going on here,” said Harry, apparently catching on.

“You don’t know what you are here?”

“No, I don’t.” Harry pulled his face into a scowl.

Cedric tried not to smile. “I thought we were supposed to return to our common rooms before nine. I didn’t want to be caught out after curfew. Was I wrong?”

“You have no idea why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?”

“School rules?” repeated Harry. “No.”

“Or Ministry decrees?” Fudge added, face beginning to redden.
“Can’t say I can think of any,” said Cedric.

Fudge’s head swung wildly between Harry and Cedric. “So it is news to you boys, then, that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?”

Cedric hoped his face looked more believable than Harry’s but he supposed the fact that they were lying was not a secret to anyone in this room.

“Yes, it is,” said Harry, and Cedric nodded.

“I think, Minister,” said Umbridge, “we might make more progress if we speak with our informant.”

“Yes, yes,” said Fudge. He cast a cruel smile at Dumbledore. “Nothing like a good witness, is there, Dumbledore?”

“Nothing at all, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore. His eyes had been on the ceiling since Cedric and Harry had been brought in, but Cedric hoped he was being more attentive to the proceedings than he let on.

“Come now, dear,” said Umbridge, motioning forward the student who had been cowering beside Percy Weasley. “It’s quite alright, now. You have done the right thing. We’re all very pleased with you. The Minister’ll tell your mother what a good girl you’ve been. Marietta’s mother, Minister,” she added, moving towards Marietta to pull her closer to the middle of the office, “is Madam Edgecombe, from the Department of Magical Transportation. Floo Network office — she’s been helping us police the Hogwarts fires, you know.”

Cedric recognized the student now, though most of her face remained covered. Her curly hair still stuck out from her scarf. She was one of Cho’s friends.

“Jolly good, jolly good,” said Fudge. “Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don’t be shy, let’s hear what you’ve got to — galloping gargoyles!”

Marietta pulled her scarf down, and even Cedric couldn’t hide his shock. Spread across her face was a tight network of dark purple pustules that covered her face from ear to ear, spelling out the word, “SNEAK.” Marietta revealed her face long enough for everyone to react before wailing loudly and pulling the scarf back up over her face.

“Never mind the spots now, dear,” said Umbridge. “Just take your robes away from your mouth and tell the Minister —”

Marietta let out another shriek and shook her head.

“Oh, very well, you silly girl, I’ll tell him.” Umbridge smiled pleasantly at the Minister, and in her sweet girlish voice, said, “Well, Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office this afternoon and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor this evening, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately at that point, this hex came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror, the girl became too distressed to tell me any more.”

“Well, now,” Fudge smiled. Cedric supposed it was supposed to be tender, but in the firelight it just looked creepy. “It is very brave of you, my dear, coming to tell Professor Umbridge. You did exactly the right thing. Now, will you tell me what happened at this meeting? What was its purpose? Who was there?”
Marietta only shook her head furiously and said nothing.

“Haven’t we got a counterjinx for this,” Fudge said to Umbridge, exasperated. “So she can speak freely?”

In a tight voice, Umbridge answered, “I have not managed to find one yet, no. But it doesn’t matter if she won’t speak, I can take up the story from here. You will remember Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade —”

“And where is your evidence for that?” interrupted Professor McGonagall.

“I have a testimony from Willy Widdershins, Minerva, who happened to be in the bar at the time. He was heavily bandaged, it is true, but his hearing was quite unimpaired. He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to report to me.”

“Oh, so that’s why he wasn’t prosecuted for setting up all those regurgitating toilets,” said Professor McGonagall, voice surprisingly calm. “What an interesting insight into our justice system.”

“Blatant corruption,” roared one of the portraits, oiled hand slamming onto an oiled desk. “The Ministry did not cut deals with petty criminals in my day, no sir, they did not!”

“Thank you, Fortescue, that will do,” said Dumbledore, with a slight wave of his hand.

“The purpose of Potter’s meeting with these students,” Umbridge continued, “was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age —”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “I’m afraid you’ll find you’re wrong there, Dolores.” He folded his hands on his desk and looked at her over the frames of his glasses.

Cedric frowned slightly. They certainly had done as Umbridge had said, and they’d certainly known she wouldn’t approve of their meeting, which is why Marietta Edgecombe looked as she did.

“Yes,” said Fudge, a new bounce in his step, “yes, do let’s here the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Go on, then, Dumbledore, go on — Willy Widdershins was lying, was he? Or was it Potter’s identical twin in hog’s Head that day? Or is there the usual simple explanation involving a reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life, and a couple of invisible dementors?”

Percy Weasley laughed loudly, but Cedric thought it either disingenuous or foolish. “Oh, very good, Minister, very good.”

Dumbledore, though, seemed unperturbed. He smiled at the Minister and at Percy Weasley. “Cornelius, I do not deny — and nor, I am sure, does Harry — that he was in the Hog’s Head that day, nor that he was trying to recruit students to a Defense Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time, illegal. If you remember, the Ministry decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harry’s Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules in the Hog’s Head at all.”

Cedric struggled to keep a straight face, but it took all his strength not to burst into a fit of giggles at the sight of Fudge’s slack face. He had no clue how to respond to Dumbledore’s perfectly
reasonable defense.

Umbridge was quicker on the uptake. “That’s all very fine, Headmaster,” she said with a toothy smile. “But we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are.”

Dumbledore raised his folded hands to beneath his chin. “Well, they certainly would be, if they had continued after the decree came into effect. Do you have any evidence that these meetings continued?”

There was a rustling of fabric behind Cedric. He resisted the urge to turn his head, but he was certain Kingsley whispered something, and he felt the unmistakable brush of air against his hand, a spell darting past him.

“Evidence?” Umbridge looked equal parts bewildered and self-satisfied. “Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?”

“Oh, she can tell us about six months’ worth of meetings? I was under the impression she was merely reporting a meeting tonight.”

“Miss Edgecombe,” Umbridge turned away from Dumbledore, “tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head. I’m sure that won’t make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months? Just nod or shake your head, dear, come now, that won’t activate the jinx further.”

Cedric was shocked as Marietta shook her head.

Umbridge blinked quickly. “I don’t think you understood the question, did you, dear? I am asking whether you’ve been going to these meetings for the past six months. You have, haven’t you?”

Again, Marietta shook her head.

Cedric was not surprised so much that Marietta was answering in the negative, but rather by the blank look in her eyes. He could not decide how he felt, knowing Kingsley Shacklebolt had erased this girl’s memory.

“What do you mean by shaking your head, girl?”

“I would have thought her meaning was quite clear,” said McGonagall. “There have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?”

Marietta nodded.

“But there was a meeting tonight! There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement. And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organized, Potter — why are you shaking your head, girl?”

“Usually,” began McGonagall in a cold voice, “when a person shakes their head, they mean ‘no.’ So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign language as yet unknown to humans —”

Umbridge grabbed Marietta by the shoulders and began shaking her very hard. Kingsley and Cedric both started forward. Dumbledore was on his feet, wand raised, and Umbridge leapt backwards from Marietta, shaking her hands as if she had just grabbed a hot poker that had been left in the fire.
“I cannot allow you to manhandle my students, Dolores,” said Dumbledore.

Cedric wondered where that fury had been when he and Harry were dragged in, wand pressed to throat, but he was glad that Dumbledore was paying more attention to the situation than he had appeared.

“You must calm yourself, Madam Umbridge,” said Kingsley, in a low voice. “You don’t want to get yourself into trouble now.”

Umbridge looked up at Kingsley, who could have been double her height. “No — I mean — yes, you’re right Shacklebolt, I forgot myself.” She smoothed her hair and her cardigan.

“Dolores,” said Fudge, “the meeting tonight, the one we definitely know happened —”

“Yes. Yes, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded this evening to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain trustworthy students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however. I have all their names here. Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Requirement for me to see if they had left anything behind. We needed evidence and the room provided.”

And, to Cedric’s dismay, Umbridge handed Fudge the list of names that had been gathered at the Hog’s Head all those months ago. Cedric’s name was tucked into the top, near the Weasleys’, and Harry’s was at the bottom, signed after everyone else.

“The moment saw Potter’s name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with.”

“Excellent,” said Fudge, once again looking cheerful. “Excellent, Dolores, and… by thunder…..” Fudge looked up at Dumbledore and handed the list to him. “Se what they’ve named themselves? Dumbledore’s Army.”

Dumbledore seemed to be doing some very quick thinking as he looked down at the list. Cedric felt his stomach drop into his stomach. If they could have just named it the Defense Association as Cho had suggested….

“Well, the game is up,” said Dumbledore. “Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius, or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?”

Cedric did not understand. Dumbledore had nothing to do with this. It did not seem that anyone else understood, either, though McGonagall and Kingsley exchanged a fearful glance.

“Statement?” parroted Fudge. “I don’t —”

“Dumbledore’s Army, Cornelius. Not Potter’s Army, Dumbledore’s Army.”

“But — but —” Fudge’s face turned red suddenly. He stepped backwards, into the fire, yelped, and when he was done stamping out his cloak said, in a hoarse voice, “You? You organized this?”

“I did,” said Dumbledore.

“You recruited these students for — for your army?”

“Tonight was supposed to be the first meeting, merely to see if they would be interested in joining me. I see now it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe.”
Marietta nodded. Fudge seemed to swell three inches larger with the pride of a horrendous conspiracy being proven right.

“Then you have been plotting against me!”

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore with a pleasant smile.

“No!” Harry said, stepping forward.

Cedric grabbed his wrist to hold him back, and Dumbledore shot a warning glance at him. Cedric understood what Dumbledore was doing, because he had done it for Harry a month earlier. Dumbledore was going to take the fall in place of Harry.

Harry, it seemed, did not find this plan acceptable. “No, Professor Dumbledore —”

“Quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office.”

“Yes, shut up, Potter,” Fudge said, rubbing his hands together. “Well, well, I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead —”

“Instead you get to arrest me. It’s like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn’t it?”

“Weasley!” Fudge turned to Percy. “Weasley, you’ve got it all written down, everything he’s said, his confession, have you got it!”

“Yes, sir, I think so!”

“That bit about how he’s trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he’s been working to destabilize me?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it, yes!” Percy tried to wipe a splash of ink off his nose, but succeeded in smearing it further along his face and hands.

“Very well then,” said Fudge, “duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the Daily Prophet at once. If we send a fast owl, we should make the morning edition!”

Percy rushed from the room, slamming the heavy door behind him.

“Dumbledore, you will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged and sent to Azkaban to await trial!”

Dumbledore’s smile remained fixed in place. “Yes, I thought we might hit this little snag.”

“Snag? I see no snag!”

“I’m afraid I do. You seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to — what is the phrase? ‘Come quietly.’ I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course, but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of things I would rather be doing.”

Fudge gaped like a grindylow yanked from the water. Umbridge’s face had turned a nice shade of purple, complementing her cardigan nicely, and she raised her wand at Dumbledore. The two aurors behind Harry and Cedric approached Dumbledore.

“Don’t be silly, Dawlish,” said Dumbledore. “I am sure you are an excellent Auror, and I seem to remember that you achieved ‘Outstanding’ in all your N.E.W.T.s, but if you attempt to bring me in
by force, I will have to hurt you.”

“So,” Fudge said, drawing his wand from his robes, “you intend to take on Dawlish, Shacklebolt, Dolores, and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?”

“He will not be single-handed!” said McGonagall, as she pulled out her own wand.

“Oh, yes he will,” Dumbledore said. “Hogwarts needs you.”

“Enough of this rubbish!” shouted Fudge. “Take him!”

There was a flash of silver light, blinding Cedric. A loud bang echoed in the small office. The ground trembled, and the room filled with smoke. Something threw Cedric to the ground, and the sound of spellcasting was lost amid the shouts of portraits. The chaos of the duel reminded Cedric of the graveyard, the sounds of curses over his head, the disorienting feeling of being unable to determine where friends, enemies, and escape routes were. He squeezed his eyes closed and pressed his face into the stone floor, hoping it would remind him he was in the castle. It only reminded him of the headstones. He reached his hand out, and grabbed onto the first thing his fingers brushed. It was someone’s robes. He hoped it was Harry’s.

Cedric did not know how long the battle went on. He could not recall the moment the sounds stopped. He only realized it was over when Professor Dumbledore pulled him to his feet.

“Cedric?” his voice was not unkind, but it was worried, as if it was not the first time Dumbledore had said his name. “Are you alright?”

There was a high pitched whine echoing in Cedric’s ears. He wondered if it was only a reaction to the silence or something worse. “Yes, sir,” he said.

He looked to his right, where he was still holding onto the sleeve of Harry’s robe. Professor McGonagall was beside him, holding Marietta in one arm.

The office was in chaos. Portraits askew, delicate instruments shattered, a desk overturned. Umbridge, Fudge, Kingsley, and Dawlish were collapsed on the floor.

“Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley, too, or it would have looked very suspicious. They’ll wake very soon, and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate. You must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground. They will not remember.”

“Where will you go, Professor?” asked Harry, voice anxious. “Grimmauld Place?”

“Oh, no.” Dumbledore’s smile was grim. “I am not going into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he’d never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you. Listen close, Harry — study Occlumency as hard as you can. Do you understand me? Do everything Professor Snape tells you, and practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams — you will understand why soon enough, but you must promise me —”

Dawlish stirred.

Dumbledore closed his hand around Harry’s wrist, and Harry looked ill, suddenly. Cedric did not understand.

“Close your mind,” Dumbledore said again, “you will understand —”
Fawkes the phoenix squawked once and flew over Dumbledore’s head. Dumbledore clasped his hand around the phoenix’s tail, and in a flash of fire, both were gone.

Fudge scrambled to his feet, rubbing his eyes. “Where is he? Where is he?”

“I don’t know!” Kingsley shouted back. He did not look in a particular hurry to run anywhere.

“He didn’t Disapparate!” Umbridge said.

“The stairs, then!” said Dawlish, and he, Kingsley, and Umbridge rushed from the office.

Fudge did not go after them. He straightened his tie and tucked his wand into his pocket. “Well, Minerva, I’m afraid this is the end of your friend Dumbledore.”

“You think so, do you?” McGonagall’s lips pursed into a look of distaste. “Then you have severely underestimated him.”

Fudge ignored her. “You’d better get those three off to bed.”

McGonagall did not fight him. It seemed, for once, she and the Minister were on the same page. She kept a hand on Harry’s shoulder and a hand on Marietta’s. Cedric’s hand was still locked around Harry’s robe, and he stumbled after them, down the stairs, into the corridor.

“I can put myself to bed, Professor,” said Harry, voice low, face hard. “You can take care of Marietta.”

McGonagall looked unsure. “Potter — you’ll do as Dumbledore asked, won’t you?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, in the same low voice.

McGonagall seemed satisfied and looked at Cedric. “You don’t look well. Would you like to come down to the infirmary with Miss Edgecombe?”

“No, Professor,” Cedric managed. “Thank you.”

McGonagall frowned at him. “Are you sure? Should I alert Professor Sprout for you?”

“No.” Cedric tried to sound more confident this time. “No, thank you.”

“To bed, then, both of you.” She took the still bewildered Marietta down the corridor towards Madam Pomfrey’s office.

“Cedric?” Harry said after a moment.

“Yes?”

“Can you let go of me?”

Cedric released Harry’s robes and ran his hands over his face. “I’m sorry.” When he opened his eyes again, Harry was already heading for the stairs, up to Gryffindor Tower, and Cedric was left alone.

Chapter End Notes
Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Harry’s impossible hopes of keeping Umbridge’s takeover of Hogwarts from his parents were dashed immediately the next morning. He remembered Fudge telling Percy to rush the information to the Daily Prophet, and, sure enough, Umbridge was plastered on the front page of the morning edition and Dumbledore’s flight was described in absurd and wildly inaccurate detail.

Hermione threw down the paper, clearly too disgusted to even finish the article. “What are we going to do?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Ron, poking at his eggs. “Nothing to do.”

“But what really happened?” asked Dean Thomas, leaning in closer to Harry. “You and Diggory were the only ones that were in the office. Did Dumbledore and the Minister really duel?”

“No,” Harry said, but didn’t provide any further details. His mind was on the inevitable conversation he would have to have with his parents about leaving Hogwarts.
Harry wondered if Umbridge would actually let his parents take him out of school, or if she would be loathe to let him disappear to somewhere she couldn’t keep an eye on him. All of his reasons for staying were gone. He and Cho had hardly spoken since their dismal date, the D.A. was finished, and all that was left were his O.W.L.s, which suddenly looked very far away, despite the loads of review homework his professors had been piling on him.

An older girl got up from the Slytherin table and set the Daily Prophet down as she passed the Hufflepuff table. “Hey, Diggory,” she smiled, “did you see the duel, or were you unconscious again?”

Cedric turned back to his breakfast without comment. Amber Lais started to stand, but her sister pulled her back into her seat. Hannah Abbott stood up, too, prefect badge glittering on her chest. She didn’t say anything, but she glared sharply at the girl.

The girl only laughed, and left the hall with a few of her friends on her arm.

Harry dropped his toast onto his plate. “Let’s get out of here.” He was suddenly out of an appetite.

Not even Neville protested as they left the breakfast table.

Professor Sprout, usually cheery and happy to see her students, was thin-lipped and grim-faced as the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors filed in for class. She set them to work aerating the soil around a cluster of Self-Fertilizing Shrubs. The mood of the class was similar. Herbology was a class full of moving around, of activity, and it usually made a great place for conversation. Today, students quietly asked their partners to pass a trowler and gossip was whispered in passing.

“Dumbledore’ll be back before long.” Hannah Abbott knelt carefully beside Harry so as not to dirty her robes too badly. “They couldn’t keep him away in our second year and they won’t be able to this time.”

Harry didn’t say anything. He had a feeling this was different. Last time Lucius Malfoy had bullied the governors into suspending Dumbledore. This time the Ministry was just short of waging war against Dumbledore and everything he stood for.

“I hope so,” he finally managed.

“He will,” she said more confidently. There was an anger in her eyes that Harry did not expect from someone as gentle as Hannah. “The Ministry will realize you were right all along. They’ll have to.”

“I just hope they don’t realize too late.”

“If they do, they deserve it.” She packed the soil around her shrub roots rather aggressively as the bell rang.

“Did you… know that girl from this morning?” Harry asked, peeling off his dragonhide gloves.

It was as if being aware of her anger shocked it out of her. Hannah’s cheeks colored with embarrassment, and she brushed off her robes as she stood. “Alexandra’s family of sort — distant, I guess. We know each other because our gran’s grew up together, so I hear a lot about her, and I think she hears a lot about me. She’s not very nice.”

The statement was so obvious, Harry had to laugh. It reminded him of something Neville might say. “No, she isn’t nice at all,” he agreed.
After nearly three hours of tending to shrubs, Harry was quite hungry for lunch. Ernie caught up with him, Hannah, Ron, Hermione, and Neville as they started up the steps towards the Entrance Hall.

“I didn’t want to say it in front of Sprout,” Ernie said, leaning in and dropping his voice to a whisper, “but I heard from the Fat Friar that Umbridge tried to get into Dumbledore’s office last night after searching the grounds for him. Couldn’t get past the gargoyle. The Head’s office has sealed itself against her. Apparently she had a right little tantrum.”

Hermione laughed a mean sort of laugh Harry had never heard from her before. “I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Head’s office, lording it over all the teachers, the stupid, puffed-up, power-crazy old —”

“Now, do you really want to finish that sentence, Granger?”

Draco Malfoy stood just inside the Entrance Hall, leaning against one of the gargoyles. His two cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, very nearly blended into the grotesque stone work of the statue.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff,” Malfoy continued in a lofty voice.

“Prefects can’t dock points from other houses, Malfoy,” said Hannah Abbott.

“Yeah, we’re prefects too, remember?” said Ron.

Harry exchanged a sympathetic look with Neville.

“I know prefects can’t dock points, Weasel King,” Malfoy said, upper lip curling in an amused smear, “but members of the Inquisitorial Squad —”

“The what?” said Hermione.

“The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger.” Malfoy pointed at a small silver “I” beside his green and silver prefect badge. “A select number of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge. Anyway, members of the Inquisitorial Squad do have the power to dock points from any of the houses. So, Granger, I’ll have five from you for being rude about our new headmistress…. Abbott, five for contradicting me…. Five because I don’t like you, Potter. Weasley, your shirt’s untucked, so I’ll have another five for that…. Macmillan, five for the dirt on your robes, and Longbottom, five because you’re so stupid. Oh, yeah, and I forgot you’re a Mudblood, Granger, so ten for that.”

Ron and Harry reached for their wands, but Hermione grabbed their arms. She did not have a third hand to grab Hannah, however, who leveled her wand at Malfoy’s nose.

“Take all the points you want from Hufflepuff, Malfoy,” said Hannah, “but take back your foul language, unless you want frog breath for the rest of the year.”

Ernie tried to pull back Hannah’s arm, but she threw him off.

Malfoy only laughed at them. “You couldn’t hex the stripes off a kneazle, Abbott. Us Slytherins have a word for families like yours, Mug —”

There was a flash of green and Malfoy was thrown back against the gargoyle. His head hit stone with a loud crack, and he seemed to black out for a brief moment. Crabbe and Goyle got out their wands, and Harry and his friends ducked behind the large hall door just barely avoiding two
Stunning Jinxes. They could hear Malfoy coughing, and all six of them prepared their wands for
dueling, but Crabbe and Goyle didn’t advance.

“Cowards,” Malfoy shouted at them, voice raspy. “Crabbe, Goyle, go find the Headmistress —
Don’t look at me like that, you idiots!”

But now even Harry could smell the foul odor coming from Malfoy’s breath, far away as they
were. Hermione wrinkled her nose. Ron, though he looked like he wanted to puke, also looked like
he was trying not to laugh.

Neville peered around the side of the door. “They’ve gone. You’re going to be in a lot of trouble,
Hannah.”

“I don’t care,” she snapped. “Today’s been awful enough as it is. This is a highlight.”

“He did deserve it,” said Ernie, “but surely he was bluffing. It would be ridiculous to let him dock
points, completely undermine the prefect system.”

But as they stepped around the doors, they all turned to the giant hourglasses that marked House
points. Even as they watched, rubies, topazes, and sapphires flew towards the tops of their glasses.
It was only the emeralds that remained steady.

“Noticed, have you?” said Fred from behind them. He and George were just coming down the last
marble staircase. Their uniforms looked mussed, and Harry wondered if they’d only just tumbled
out of bed. They were only taking two N.E.W.T.s each, and never had anywhere to be before lunch.

“Malfoy just docked us nearly fifty points,” said Harry.

“Montague tried to do us just now,” said George.

“What do you mean tried?” asked Ron, voice wary.

“Never managed to get all the words out,” said Fred, “due to the fact that we forced him headfirst
into that Vanishing Cabinet on the second floor.”

“But you’ll get into terrible trouble!” said Hermione, while Harry and Hannah laughed.

“Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks,” said George, “since even we don’t
know where we sent him.”

“Hannah got a Frog Breath Curse off on Malfoy,” said Neville.

Fred and George raised their eyebrows, like they were seeing Hannah in a new light.

“Well done, Miss Prefect,” said Fred.

“Don’t you all care that you could get detention —” said Hermione.

“Umbridge can’t touch us,” said George.

“— or expelled?”

“Ah,” Fred tapped his finger against his nose, “now you’re getting somewhere.”

“You want her to expel you? What would your mother say?”
Fred and George glanced at each other. Even Ron seemed to pale.

“Mum’ll have to deal,” said George, finally.

“We really don’t care about staying,” said Fred. “She took away Quidditch, Defense, and now all this?” he gestured at the hour glasses. “We’d walk out right now if we weren’t determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first.” He checked his pocket watch. “Phase one is about to begin. I’d get in the Great Hall for lunch if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can’t have had anything to do with it.”

“With what?” asked Ernie Macmillan in a squeaky voice.

“You’ll see,” said George. “Run along now.”

Fred and George disappeared down one of the corridors, even though most students were headed into lunch.

“Perhaps we’d better….” Hermione said.

“Yeah, let’s,” said Ron. They all headed into the Great Hall.

Harry, however, barely got two steps across the threshold before he was tapped on the shoulder. He and Hannah each turned around to see Filch looking at them with an unsettling grin.

“Potter, Abbott, the Headmistress would like a word with you two.”

“I didn’t do it,” said Harry, just as Hannah said, “It wasn’t Harry, just me.”

“Didn’t ask what you lot did.” Filch coughed into his hand, though it sounded something like a laugh. “Follow me.”

Hannah and Harry exchanged a worried look. Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ernie all looked nervous too, but there was nothing they could do. Harry and Hannah had to follow Filch.

Filch, who was known for being cantankerous and irate, was unusually cheery as he led the two students upstairs. He was even humming what Harry supposed was a cheerful ditty, but with Filch’s raspy voice it sounded eerie and mournful.

“Things are changing around here,” he said as they reached the hallway to Umbridge’s office.

“I’ve noticed,” said Harry in a cold voice. Hannah shot him a warning look, which he thought unfair coming from the girl who had just hexed another prefect.

“I’ve been telling Dumbledore for years and years he’s too soft with you all. You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stink Pellets if you’d known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could’ve strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Twenty-Nine comes in, Potter, I’ll be allowed to do them things…. And she’s asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves…. Oh, things are going to be very different around here with her in charge.” Filch’s grin was ear-to-ear now as he stopped in front of Umbridge’s office door. “Here we are.” He knocked three times and opened the door. “The Potter boy and Miss Abbott for you, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Argus,” she said in her sugary voice. “Wait with Miss Abbott for a moment for me. I’ll only be a minute with Mr. Potter.”
Harry could not decide if a minute was good or bad as he stepped into her office. It was the same as ever — pink and lacy, with brightly colored kittens walking through her china. His Firebolt and Fred and George’s Cleansweeps were still chained up against the wall behind her desk. The only real difference was a wooden block with gilded letters that read, “Headmistress.” Just the sight of it made Harry’s temper flare.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to the chair just on the other side of her desk with her bright pink quill.

Harry did so, hesitantly.

Umbridge continued writing on her parchment for about four more lines before she finally set the father down. “Now,” she said with a broad smile, “what would you like to drink?”

Harry, who had only been in this office to be scolded and tortured was sure he had misheard her. “What?”


She tapped her wand against the desk in front of Harry, and a cup filled with each appeared before him.

Harry had just spent three hours planting shrubbery and was rather thirsty. But it felt like accepting a gift from basilisk. “Nothing, thank you.”

“I wish you to have a drink with me. Choose one.”

Harry could not understand her determination. “No, thank you.”

“Mr. Potter, I insist. You don’t want to keep Miss Abbott waiting.”

Harry very much would not mind keeping Hannah out of this room as long as he could, but he also knew there was a threat hidden in Umbridge’s falsely sweet voice.

“Fine, tea, I guess.”

She smiled and came around the desk to add cream to his tea. He didn’t understand why she had to stand up and put her back to him to do it, though, when she could have easily reached from her side of the desk.

Umbridge turned back around and handed him the tea. “There, now drink before it gets cold, won’t you?” She folded her hands and studied him for a moment. “I just thought we ought to have a little chat, after the distressing events of last night.”

Harry did not say anything. He stared up at Umbridge, waiting for her to assign him detention for the business with Dumbledore’s Army. She did not, however, and returned to her seat, smile eerily steady.

She seemed to be waiting for something, but Hary did not know what. He continued an uncomfortable staring contest with her, reminiscent of the staring contest they’d had just after Harry’s trial. Though back then, Umbridge had been watching him with a piercing and malicious curiosity. Now, her stare seemed more like that of a spider, deciding how and when to consume its catch.

“You’re not drinking up!” she said.
Harry lifted the glass to his lips, thinking he should just get this unfortunate interview over with. Before he managed to drink any of the tea, however, he saw one of the kittens behind Umbridge, staring at him with bright blue eyes, identical to Mad-Eye Moody’s magical glass eye. Harry remembered Mad-Eye’s paranoia, and what Mad-Eye would be shouting at him if he saw that Harry had just nearly drunk from a cup handed to him by a known enemy.

“Vigilance, Mr. Potter!” echoed in his head.

“What’s the matter?” Umbridge asked as he lowered his glass. “Do you want sugar?”

“Er — no.” He raised the glass to his lips once more, and tipped it back, but kept his mouth firmly closed.

“Good,” she said, “very good. Now then.” She leaned forward in her desk, like she was about to let Harry in on a secret. “Where is Albus Dumbledore?”

“No idea,” said Harry.

Umbridge’s smile twitched, but did not shrink. “Drink up, drink up,” she said. “Now, Mr. Potter, let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Mr. Potter.”

Harry pretended to take another sip of his tea. “I don’t know where he is.” Perhaps he was being showy, and she would know he wasn’t truly drinking, but he almost wanted her to realize that. He wanted her to know he’d found her out.

The danger, though, was that she might try it again. It was no wonder Mad-Eye was the way he was. The paranoia Harry had thought so absurd last year seemed like a slippery slope suddenly.

Umbridge’s smile deflated, like she’d just found out her fly was little more than a gnat. “Very well. In that case, you will kindly tell me the whereabouts of Regulus Black.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Mr. Potter,” the sweetness in her voice grew strained, “may I remind you that it was I who almost caught Regulus Black in the Gryffindor fire last October. I know perfectly well it was you he was meeting, and if I had had any proof, neither of you would be at large today, I promise you. I repeat, Mr. Potter, where is Regulus Black?”

“Just wondering, Professor, if we assumed, say, for argument’s sake, that I was talking with the man who tortured a good friend’s parents, the man who murdered another good friend’s family, who fought against my parents in a war, who Imperiused my dad’s best friend last year — what part of, ‘neither of you would be at large today,’ would make me want to tell you what I did — if I did — know?”

Her upper lip curled back. “You and your father share quite a bit of arrogance, I see.”

“Thank you.” Harry took another fake sip of tea.

“So you haven’t any idea of the whereabouts of Dumbledore nor Black?”

“Not a clue.”

Her stare searched every inch of his face for evidence of a lie, but Harry maintained a still expression, fueled by his anger at her, and a stubbornness so strong, it seemed at one with his very
“Very well, Mr. Potter, I will take your word for it this time, but be warned: The might of the Ministry stands behind me. All channels of communication in and out of this school are being monitored. A Floo Network Regulator is keeping watch over every fire in Hogwarts — except my own, of course. My Inquisitorial Squad is opening and reading all owl post entering and leaving the castle. If I find a shred of evidence —”

Umbridge was cut off by the sound of a loud explosion that rocked the office. Two china plates fell and shattered, the mews of the kittens lost in the crashing of porcelain. Harry used the opportunity to dump his tea into a vase of dried flowers.

“Back to lunch with you, Potter!” Umbridge shouted, and rushed out of her office.

Harry looked longingly at his Firebolt, wondering if he could steal it, but she would know it had been him.

Hannah poked her head into the office. “Oh — good. I was worried she’d Vanished you.”

“What happened?” asked Harry.

“Don’t know. Let’s go look for it.”

Harry and Hannah hurried down the corridor after Umbridge. They did not have to look very far. In the main hall, somebody had set off an enormous crate of enchanted fireworks, and it was already spreading through the entire first floor and the Great Hall.

There were giant green and gold dragons, and bright pink Catherine wheels as large as a full-grown person whizzing through the air. If Harry had had any doubt as to who the perpetrators were, it would have been dashed as he saw floating sparklers writing swear words into the air and even scorching some into the walls. None of the fireworks seemed to be fizzing out as Harry watched. This was not a sudden burst — this was perpetual chaos.

He could not help it. He broke into laughter.

Filch and Umbridge stood at the bottom of the stairs, eyes transfixed on the scene in front of them. As they stared, one of the fireworks burst through a window and out onto the grounds. A dragon soared down the corridor, sparking and smoking as it went.

“Hurry, Filch, hurry!” Umbridge shrieked, suddenly moved to action. “They’ll be all over the school unless we do something — Stupefy!”

The red light from her wand struck a blue and red rocket. Instead of freezing or fading, the rocket exploded with such a large bang, it scorched a hole into a portrait three meters off.

“Don’t Stun them, Filch!” Umbridge shouted, as if it had been his idea.

“Right you are, Headmistress!” Filch grabbed a broom from a nearby cupboard and began swatting at the fireworks. All he was successful in was setting the broom on fire.

Hannah burst into laughter, too, though she tried to conceal it in her hands.

“Come on,” Harry said, and pulled her towards the nearest secret passage: a corridor hidden behind a tapestry. Sure enough, Fred and George were there, shaking with silent laughter as they listened to Umbridge and Filch’s shouts.
“Impressive,” Harry said in a quiet voice. “You’ll put Dr. Filibuster out of business, no problem.”

“Cheers,” said George. “Oh, I hope she tries Vanishing them next. They multiply by ten very time you try.”

“You invented these?” Hannah asked with awe.

“Want any?” Fred asked. “Five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe. But we’ll have to put you on backorder. That’s our entire stock lit up now.”

Hannah shook her head. “I’m a prefect.”

“For who?” asked Harry. “Not to her you’re not.”

Hannah considered this. “I suppose I do owe you for getting me out of being in trouble for hexing Malfoy.”

“That’s the spirit,” said George, and clapped her on the shoulder.

The fireworks spread throughout the school that afternoon. They disrupted class and caused chaos everywhere they went. Parchment scorched, books with holes in them, explosions over lectures, and yet none of the teachers seemed particularly concerned by them.

Even Professor McGonagall, strict and highly competent, watched idly as an enormous Herebredian soared through her classroom, sparking and shooting flames at the ceiling.

“Dear me,” she said, face and voice flat. “Miss Brown, would you mind running along to the headmistress and informing her that we have an escaped firework in our classroom?”

For a day that should have been terrible, it ended up far better than Harry could have imagined. Professor Umbridge spent the entire afternoon and evening running all over the school, answering the responses of other teachers. Though Harry was certain that many of his professors were skilled enough to remove the fireworks, none of them seemed interested in trying.

At the end of the day, as Harry was headed back towards Gryffindor Tower, he saw Umbridge step out of Flitwick’s classroom, and, much to Harry’s pleasure, she was covered in soot and her dress disheveled. Embers fizzled on her enormous black bow.

“Thank you so much, Professor,” said Flitwick with a small smile. “I could have gotten rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn’t sure whether I had the authority.”

Beaming as bright as a sparkler himself, Flitwick slammed the door in her face.

The Gryffindor common room was a riot that evening. Everyone was loud, and congratulated Fred and George for a job well done. It was little more than an hour before they had enough order forms for fireworks filled out to replenish their stock and more.

It was certainly not the environment to do homework in, and even Hermione agreed that a night off was best. They’d had a long day, and it felt good to kick back and relax. As Harry sat down on one of the plush chairs beside the fire, it wasn’t the unfinished homework that nagged at him, but the mirror sitting in the pocket of his robes, reminding him that he needed to have a conversation with his parents about whether or not he would stay at Hogwarts.

At least sitting here, while rockets blazed outside the tower window, Harry didn’t feel like going home. It was hard to remember that just a few hours ago Umbridge had tried to poison him,
probably with Veritaserum.

“Everything alright, Harry?” Hermione asked, and took a sip of butterbeer.

“Oh — yeah.” He’d already told them about his unusual meeting with Umbridge. “Just don’t want to talk to my parents about last night.”

Hermione’s unusually relaxed face pulled itself into a more familiar and serious expression. “I know you need your O.W.L.s, but….”

“I know,” said Harry. “Mum and Dad won’t think it’s worth it.”

“Maybe they could make arrangements for you to be tested for your O.W.L.s privately,” suggested Hermione. She sounded chipper, but Harry could see on her face she wasn’t thrilled about the idea. “I’ll send you the notes for everything we do in class to review, and I can help you if you like.”

“You’ve got enough work to do without taking notes for me, too.”

“It’s just a simple Duplicate Charm.”

Ron frowned. “If copying your notes is just a simple charm, why d’you make Harry and I write it out by hand?”

“How else will you learn the material?” Hermione took another sip of butterbeer. “Besides, no one’s stopping you from learning the charm yourself.”

Harry sensed an oncoming argument and decided he was not in the mood. He got up from beside the fireplace and headed up into the dormitory. Not that the conversation with his parents would be any more appealing, but he knew they were worried, and the longer he waited to talk to them, the worse it would be.

Reluctantly, Harry drew the curtains around his bed for some privacy and pulled the mirror from his robes. His reflection wasn’t the best, illuminated solely by the lamp above his head, but it was enough.

“Mum? Dad?” he said into the mirror, his breath clouding the glass. When it cleared, he was met with an image he didn’t quite understand. The mirror was dark, with a few twinkling lights somewhere above. “Sirius? Uncle Remus? Is anyone there?”

The light’s moved and suddenly Harry was staring at Sirius — no, at Regulus.

“Harry? Is that you there?”

“Uh — yeah. Hi. Are Mum and Dad there?”

“They actually just stepped out to the Ministry.”

Harry thought that didn’t sound good. “Oh. I just… wanted to talk to them….”

“About Dolores Umbridge?”

“Er — yeah. Did you see the paper?”

“I did not, personally, no. But the shouting match it prompted was hard to miss.”

“Oh. Oh no. Um, I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. The house hasn’t seen this much excitement since before Andromeda eloped.”

Harry knew that was to be Tonks’s mother, and he wondered what exactly Regulus meant by excitement. Harry did not think of shouting matches as exciting.

“Did, uh, Mum and Dad decide to take me out of Hogwarts?”

“Do you want them to?”

“I’m not sure.”

Regulus did not seem to find this answer strange. “Is it true that Umbridge tortures you?”

“More or less.”

As always, it was impossible to tell what Regulus thought of this information. His face remained as impassive as always. Harry wondered if Regulus cared whether or not Harry stayed at Hogwarts. Regulus might be an unusual objective party in all of this.

“Do you think I should stay?” Harry asked.

Regulus looked at Harry through the mirror for such a long moment, Harry started to feel uncomfortable, like a staring contest with a cat.

“I think,“ he finally answered, “there are decisions we can live with and decisions we cannot.”

Harry considered this. “What if I think I could live with either?”

“I’m not sure that’s the right question.”

Harry realized what Regulus really meant: It was not about which decision Harry could live with, but about which decision his parents could live with. He knew his mother and father would never be happy knowing he was in an unsafe place, knowing they’d let him stay there.

“You didn’t tell me what they decided. Why are they at the Ministry?”

“You parents would like to pull you out of Hogwarts. Dumbledore has convinced them not to. They are at the Ministry fighting to get Umbridge replaced.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Why does Dumbledore want me to stay?” But even as Harry had asked the question, he thought he had an answer. He needed to go to his Occlumency lessons. Dumbledore had been so insistent as he had left. And Harry had felt such intense anger….

“I believe it had something to do with Severus Snape.”

Harry already knew Regulus disliked Snape, but even he was shocked by the revulsion in Regulus’s voice.

“You still think Snape’s up to something?”

“I think it is unlikely that even Severus knows where his loyalties lie.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

“A snake may coil itself to fit into any space in such a way that you can no longer determine neither head nor tail. You would be wise to avoid such a snake until you are sure of where its fangs
A chill went down Harry’s spine. Regulus’s voice was so calm and cold, but it made him sound as deadly as the snake he had just described. Harry wanted to ask Regulus for a more direct answer, but he heard footsteps coming up the dormitory steps. “Sorry — I have to go. Tell Mum and Dad I love them. And Uncle Remus and Sirius, if you see them.”

Of course, Harry.”

Harry tucked the mirror back into his cloak just as the door creaked open. He heard Dean and Seamus talking quietly, probably thinking Harry was asleep.

He laid down on his bed, thinking of his upcoming Occlumency lesson. He hadn’t practiced at all. He tried to empty his mind, but he kept turning Regulus’s words over in his head. If Snape wasn’t trustworthy, what if these lessons were only making things worse for him? What if it was easier for Voldemort to invade his mind because of Snape’s lessons?

But Dumbledore had been so insistent. Harry wondered if Dumbledore was right to trust Snape. Regulus didn’t think so. His parents were okay with it, though. They were even working with Snape all summer. But Regulus had gone to the graveyard to kill Voldemort. And Snape? Snape had gone with Lily, Sirius, and Remus to rescue Regulus, or had he only done that to stay in Dumbledore’s good graces?

Harry rubbed at his temple. It made no sense, none at all.

Despite his headache and his worries, Harry fell asleep almost as soon as he closed his eyes — or, it was more like he was pulled into sleep. Like so many nights before, he ended up before that black door in the Department of Mysteries that he had dreamed so much about. This time, though, it opened.

Harry crossed the threshold into a circular room, lined with doors. He did not know which one to take, but he did not need to decide. He stepped forward confidently and passed through a door identical to the one he had just come through. This new room was full of strange ticking noises, like the inner workings of a clock. Something reflected small beams of light around the walls, dancing like sunlight on the face of a pocket watch. It was the sort of room Harry could have stopped and explored for an hour, but he did not even pause for a moment. He went on.

A door at the far end of this room led into a large room, with high ceilings and wide walls. The room was filled from end to end with rows and rows of shelves, stretching as high as the ceiling and onward to the end of the room, further than Harry could see. The shelves were filled with glass spheres, coated in dust. Despite the overwhelming size of the room and the seemingly infinite number of spheres, Harry knew where he needed to go. He knew what he wanted — or what someone else wanted.

Harry stepped forward. His pace increased into a run. His scar began to throb.

A loud explosion rocked Harry awake, and he stared at the ceiling above his bed, irritated by the loud laughter of Seamus, Ron, and Dean as they watched the fireworks outside. He had been so close that time, so very, very close.
been practicing his Occlumency that week, between the end of the D.A. and Dumbledore’s departure.

He tried to cram practice into class, but that was not his brightest of ideas. Emptying his mind of thought and emotion while McGonagall demanded that he recite the Theory of Transmutation Termination did not work well.

The only class it seemed to do any good in was Divination. Firenze the centaur was their professor now that Trelawney had been dismissed, and his classroom was modeled after his forest home. Students sat on mossy floors. The plants in the room made the class warm and humid. Often, they were studying stars, and Firenze turned out the classroom lights to display the heavens above them. Firenze also was unconcerned by the students’ failure or success in actually divining the future. He described the gift of foresight like trying to grab at smoke. Perhaps you could glimpse shape or color but it was hard to see both. He also discouraged students from trying to predict their personal or day to day futures as Trelawney had taught them. He was more interested, and he said the stars were as well, in the larger forces that governed the world, such as good and evil, life and death.

It made an ideal environment for Harry to empty his mind and relax. However, now Harry had a new thought that nagged at the back of his mind every time he practiced Occlumency. What if Snape was teaching him wrong on purpose? What if emptying his mind made it easier for Voldemort to possess him?

It did not matter how many times Harry told himself Dumbledore thought his Occlumency lessons with Snape were important. He could not quash the doubt that Regulus Black had planted in his mind.

He ate about half of his dinner, and neither Ron nor Hermione had any encouragement to offer him as he got up to head for the dungeons.

He had just reached the doors out of the Great Hall when he saw Cho leaving the Ravenclaw table and hurrying towards him. Harry was not sure which was a worse conversation — Cho or Snape. He decided it had to be Snape, and he waited for her by the door.

“Er — how are you?” he asked.

“Okay. Harry, I just wanted, well, I wanted to say…. I just, I never dreamed Marietta would tell on us.”

Harry wondered if Dumbledore would still be here if Cho had just been more careful about who she brought to D.A. meetings. He knew Madam Pomfrey hadn’t been able to get rid of the spots, and he didn’t feel an ounce of sympathy for Marietta.

“She’s a lovely person, really,” Cho continued. “She just made a mistake.”

Harry frowned. “A mistake? She sold us all out, including you!”

“We all got away with it, didn’t we? Her Mum works for the Ministry, and it’s hard for her —”

“Ron’s dad works for the Ministry, too. So do Cedric’s parents. Have you already gone crying to him about it? Did he think she was a lovely person, too?”

“What does this have to do with Cedric?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, with a tone that clearly meant it had everything to do with Cedric. “Just thought you’d rather apologize to him than me, since you’ve hardly spoken to me since
Valentine’s.”

“Oh, and that’s my fault? You’ve hardly spoken to me.”

“I’ve been busy —”

“Busy? You’ve been busy? And it’s my fault for — for having other friends?”

“You’re not just friends with Cedric.” The acidity Harry heard in his own voice was unfamiliar to him, but he didn’t know how to stop it. He did not know who exactly he was even angry with, but it seemed so easy to take it out on Cho now.

Cho’s face went pink. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business, if you’re so busy.”

“Fine — you’re right. I have places to be.”

“Fine. Go on then.” Cho planted her feet firmly and folded her arms over her chest.

Harry knew the minute he turned around, he was in the wrong in this fight. As much as he felt this was all Marietta’s fault, as much as he thought Cho was wrong for going back and forth between him and Cedric, he knew if he left her here like this, he was the one ending things.

But he decided he was very much finished with Cho and her friends. This whole thing had been nothing but stress — and a very nice kiss, but overall, nothing but stress.

Harry turned and headed for the dungeons.

When he reached Snape’s office, he was fuming. He was angry at himself for how the fight went, angry with Cho for her terrible choice in friends, and angry at Cedric for… for nothing in particular, but this all seemed to center around him for some reason. There was very little he could do about emptying his mind. He was in for a miserable few hours.

“You’re late, Potter,” said Snape.

Harry offered no excuses. He only set his bag down on one of the desks and closed the door behind him.

Snape finished depositing a collection of memories into the Pensieve and faced Harry. “So, have you been practicing?”

Harry avoided eye contact. “Yes.”

“We’ll soon find out, won’t we? Wand out, Potter.”

Harry pulled his wand out and stood in a ready position. He wondered if he should make a Shield Charm, or prepare a Counterjinx. He wondered if there was any sense in delaying the inevitable, or if he should just give in now and let Snape sift through his fight with Cho and reprimand him.

“On the count of three, then,” said Snape. “One… two…. ”

Snape was interrupted as the door to his office flew open. The bang of wood against stone echoed in the office as Draco Malfoy rushed in.

“Professor Snape, sir — oh — sorry —”

“It’s all right, Draco,” said Snape. He lowered his wand and smoothed his robes. “Potter is here for
a little Remedial Potions.”

Draco seemed so thrilled at the idea that Harry had Remedial Potions that it did not occur to him that the dueling stance he’d caught Snape and Harry in had nothing to do with Potions.

“I didn’t know.” Draco grinned at Harry, looking as cheerful as he had yesterday, when he’d started docking points from Harry.

Harry wished he could launch a curse at Draco, but he couldn’t, certainly not in front of Snape. He settled on a more subtle revenge: he wrinkled his nose and covered his face with his sleeve.

Draco’s smile faded.

“Well, what is it, Draco?” asked Snape. It was hard to tell if Snape could smell the faint, lingering stench on Draco’s breath. Snape always looked mildly disgusted.

“It’s Professor Umbridge, sir.” Malfoy looked self-conscious as he spoke, like he was trying to hold back from breathing too much. “She needs your help. They’ve found Montague, sir. He’s turned up jammed inside a toilet on the fourth floor.”

“How did he get in there?”

“I don’t know, sir. He’s a bit confused.”

“Very well, very well — Potter,” said Snape, “we shall resume this lesson tomorrow evening instead.”

Snape left his office, robes billowing behind him. Malfoy hesitated, looking like he was debating between giving Harry a snide remark or following. It seemed he did not want to spare the breath, and he hurried after Snape.

Harry wondered how long before Malfoy got word to the entire school that Harry was in Remedial Potions. He wondered if he could find a better excuse for why he was here in Snape’s dungeons after class, but he could not think of one. The lie was, unfortunately, a perfectly sensible one.

Harry picked up his bag to leave, but as he turned, he saw a shimmering light dancing against the wall. He remembered the lights against the wall in his dream and searched for the source of this similar one. It was the Pensieve, just on the other side of the room, containing Snape’s most secret memories, memories Snape did not want Harry to see if Harry managed to break through Snape’s defenses.

Harry wondered what sorts of secrets there were. He’d seen glimpses of Snape’s childhood. It had seemed troubled, sad, lonely. Could the secrets in the Pensieve be any worse? Perhaps they were Order secrets. Perhaps they were secrets that would prove Regulus was right about Snape after all.

Harry stepped towards the Pensieve. Curiosity had always been an easy feeling for him. His parents had encouraged it when he was a child. Dumbledore had told him it was nothing to be ashamed of. His dreams these last few months had pushed his need for answers even farther.

He did not know how much time he would have before Snape returned. He glanced back over his shoulder, but he heard no sounds coming down the dungeon stairs. Perhaps he had just enough time.

Harry had reached the Pensieve now. He prodded the silver wisps with his wand. The image inside looked like the Great Hall. Harry still heard no sounds on the dungeon stairs. With a deep breath,
he plunged into the memory.

Harry indeed found his footing in the Great Hall, but the House tables were gone, and so was the general noise and excitement that accompanied most meals. Instead, the room was silent, save the scratching of quills against parchment, and rows of single desks filled hall. A sign at the front of the hall read, “Defense Against the Dark Arts — Ordinary Wizarding Level.”

Harry looked around for Snape, and found him, just one more desk back. He looked thin and sickly, almost like he’d grown up in the very dungeon he now worked in. His long, dark hair was as greasy as ever, pooling on the desk as Snape finished his Defense paper with tiny, cramped writing.

“Five more minutes!” said a familiar voice, and Harry turned to see Flitwick walking between the desks.

If this was Snape’s O.W.L. exam, that meant this was James, Remus, Lily, and Sirius’s exam as well.

They were not at all hard to find.

Sirius looked the same as he always did, perfectly at ease, arched with a sort of grace and poise that seemed unique to the Black family. His chair was tipped back on two legs and he seemed completely finished with his exam. A girl about two seats back was staring at Sirius hopefully, and it occurred to Harry just how good-looking Sirius was. The Black family was a handsome family, and Sirius wore their elegance well, no matter how hard he tried to shake it.

A little further back was Remus. He was thin and pale, not unlike Snape, except his hair was trimmed short and neat. Harry wondered if Remus had always looked like this before the Wolfsbane Potion, or if the exam was close to the full moon. Remus was still working on his exam. Though it seemed completed, he was reviewing what he’d written with a critical frown.

Sirius grinned suddenly, and gave a casual thumbs up to someone in front of him. Harry turned to see who Sirius was looking at, and found James. Harry wondered how he ever could have missed him.

It was like looking into a mirror. He and James were almost exactly the same age here, in this moment, and they looked like twins. No — not quite twins. As Harry looked more closely, he saw striking differences, but it looked more like someone had intentionally altered a rendering of Harry more than anything else.

For one, the eyes were hazel, but that was to be expected. As James lazily pushed his hair back, he revealed an unscarred forehead, but that, too, was to be expected. The messy hair, the dimple on his cheek, the quirked smile, the bony hands — all of it looked like it could have just as easily belonged to Harry.

Satisfied with his and Sirius’s confident exchange, and apparently satisfied with his exam, James set to work doodling on his paper. Harry stepped closer and watched as James drew an “L.E.” and closed around it with a heart. He did this twice more, then went back to detailing a snitch he must have drawn earlier.

Harry wondered where his mother was. He thought that she and his father hadn’t gotten along when they were in school, so he was surprised to see his dad doodling her initials in hearts. Had they started dating in their fifth year?
He found her, finally, dark red hair almost hidden in shadow, sitting against the wall. She, like Remus, was reviewing her answers, but she had a sort of confident smirk as she did so that reminded Harry of Sirius. She, like his family, did not look much different. She seemed just as tall as Harry knew her to be. Perhaps her freckles seemed brighter, and the lines on her face had not settled in just yet.

She set her quill down and looked up expectantly at Professor Flitwick.

Flitwick was looking at his pocket watch, and after two more ticks, called, “Quills down, please! That means you, too, Stebbins. Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! Accio!”

Each roll of parchment lifted from the desks of the students and into Flitwick’s arms. The small man ended up knocked over by the force of the papers. A few students laughed, but it all seemed good-natured, and three even rushed up to help Flitwick to his feet. Two of them had prefect badges on their robes, and Harry noticed his mother had gotten to her feet to help, but simply hadn’t been fast enough.

Students began to filter out of the Great Hall, stuffing notes into their bags. James hastily scribbled out his “L.E.” before shoving it into his bag.

Harry knew he was tied to Snape, because this was Snape’s memory, but he wanted to follow his parents. He didn’t care much what Snape was like as a teenager, and he’d very quickly forgotten all the questions he’d had when he’d stepped into the Pensieve.

Harry lingered in the Great Hall with his mother as she caught up with two of her girlfriends who had just sat the exam. One was in Ravenclaw robes and the other in Gryffindor. The Ravenclaw girl had a prefect badge pinned to her robes, just as Lily did. Their voices were dim as Snape left the hall, but he imagined they were talking about their exam. Then the hall started to blur, and Harry ran to catch up with Snape.

Snape, however, was hardly interesting. He had his nose pressed to his exam notes, like he was still reviewing answers though the test was well over. Harry kept glancing back, waiting for his mother to follow, but she did not appear as Snape left the castle and started out onto the grounds.

James, Sirius, and Remus were in front of Harry, and there was a fourth young man tagging along with them. He was smaller than the others with a round face and pointed nose. He looked anxious as he said, “I got the snout shape, the pupils of the eyes, and the tufted tail, but I couldn’t think what else —”

“How thick are you, Wormtail?” asked James in a voice that was so calloused it surprised Harry. “You run around with a werewolf once a month —”

“Keep your voice down,” Remus hissed.

“Well, I thought the paper was a piece of cake,” said Sirius. “I’ll be surprised if I don’t get Outstanding on it, at least.”

“Me too,” said James.

Harry envied their confidence as a student who would be sitting his exam in a little over a month and did not feel nearly as competent in any of his subjects.

“How’d you get that?” Sirius asked suddenly, and Harry saw that James had pulled a fluttering Snitch from his pocket.
“Nicked it,” James said. His tone was casual, but Harry sensed the arrogance in it. James and Sirius walked and talked like two boys who got away with everything. It wasn’t quite like Fred and George, who seemed to love mischief for the sake of mayhem. It wasn’t quite like Malfoy, who seemed to think his money and blood made him superior to everyone else. It was somewhere in between, and it unsettled Harry.

He suddenly recalled his mother saying in a temper once, “Your father was an arrogant, ignorant, pompous prat when he was in school. Don’t be like him.”

Harry had thought she had exaggerated, but it seemed she had not. James let his stolen Snitch zip around his head and grabbed it just before it got out of reach. Peter cheered for each difficult catch with such enthusiasm that Harry wondered why no one told him to calm down. Then he noticed the way James’s grin increased and realized just how much his father was enjoying showing off. He also kept ruffling his hair and turning his head down towards the lake.

At the lake’s edge, Harry could see his mother and her two friends enjoying a barefoot wade after their exam. He wondered if he could get closer that way — surely his mother was having a conversation much more interesting than his father showing off with a Snitch — but Snape had settled into a bush by the shade. The water’s edge went in and out of focus like dappled light. The memory did not quite reach his mother’s conversation.

“Put that away, will you?” Sirius finally snapped, flopping down into the grass. “Before Wormtail wets himself from excitement.”

Peter went pink and spluttered out a protest, but James shrugged. “If it bothers you.”

The way James so easily bent under Sirius reminded Harry of the way James gave into Lily’s arguments. He wondered if, as difficult as it was to imagine his mother dating this person James was now, they had managed to make it work because James treated Lily the way he treated Sirius.

Harry looked down by the lake one more time and saw the girls putting their shoes on. He hoped they would come up this way.

“I’m bored,” Sirius moaned, and rolled over onto his back. “I wish it were a full moon.”

“You might.” Remus looked up from the Transfiguration textbook he was reading and threw it at Sirius’s chest. “We’ve still got Transfiguration. If you’re bored, you could test me.”

Sirius grunted from the weight of the worn hard-backed book on his stomach. He tossed it back into the grass. “I don’t need to look at that rubbish, I know it all.”

Remus did not look as confident as he picked the book back up, and Harry was surprised by Sirius’s insensitivity to Remus, given how close they had become as adults.

“This’ll liven you up, Padfoot,” said James. “Look who it is.”

Sirius went very still and a small smile spread across his face. “Excellent. Snivellus.”

Harry turned and saw that Snape had finished looking over his notes and was starting back towards the castle. Just as Snape crossed in front of their beech tree, James called out, “All right, Snivellus?”

Snape plunged his hand into his robes and turned with the expertise of an accomplished dueler, but James and Sirius still held the element of surprise.
“Expelliarmus!” said James. Snape’s wand flew into the air and landed in the grass behind him.

Sirius and Peter both laughed. Remus frowned, eyes on his book, but said nothing. He looked like he would prefer to disappear into the tree. His shoulder moved in a way that shielded his prefect badge from view.

“Impedimenta!” said Sirius, knocking Snape off his feet before he could grab his wand again.

“How’d the exam go, Snivelly?” asked James. He and Sirius each stalked towards Snape like a pair of foxes with a cornered rabbit.

“I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment,” said Sirius. “There’ll be great grease marks all over it, they won’t be able to read a word.”

A crowd had started to gather and a few of the students laughed at Sirius’s comment. There was a strange tension in the air around the crowd, though. Exams were not yet finished and stress was high. It seemed to Harry that James and Sirius’s arrogance came as much from their own attitudes as it did from the support of the students.

James, certainly, fed off of the crowd’s laughter. He glanced down towards the lake, and Harry wondered if he wanted Lily to see this or if he was nervous that she would.

Snape cursed at James and Sirius, both with foul swearwords and impotent hexes. His wand lay three feet behind him, out of his reach as he struggled against Sirius’s curse.

“Wash out your mouth,” said James. “Scourgify!”

The spell Harry was familiar with for cleaning cauldrons after Potions frothed in Snape’s mouth. Snape coughed and choked on the spell.

“Leave him alone!” a girl’s voice shouted.

James turned, squared his shoulders, and ruffled his hair. “All right, Evans?” he asked, a much more friendly and pleasant smile on his lips.

Lily Evans, however, was scowling at James, a fury Harry was only familiar with recently, in the stress of the war. She looked at James the same way Snape looked at James. They were certainly not dating.

“Leave him alone,” she said again. “What’s he done to you?”

James paused, as if she’d asked a complicated Transfiguration exam question. “Well… it’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean.”

Some of the onlookers laughed, Sirius and Peter included. Remus hunched his shoulders a little higher, and pushed his face a little lower into his book. Lily did not laugh, either.

“You think you’re funny, but you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone.”

“I will if you go out with me, Evans,” James said with a grin. “Go on. Go out with me, and I’ll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again.”

If Lily found this request as absurd as Harry did, she did not show it. She did not splutter nor turn red. Harry wondered if it was because the idea of dating James did not bother her, or if it was because she’d grown used to him asking.
She tossed her head and said, “I wouldn’t go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid.”

The crowd laughed at this, too; their love for James’s antics apparently included watching him get turned down by Lily Evans.

“Bad luck, Prongs,” said Sirius. He did not seem to think the luck was that bad. He turned back to Snape, who had just managed to shake off Sirius’s curse and get his hand around his wand. “Hey —” Sirius shouted, but he was not quick enough.

Snape’s wand flashed and a gash of blood cut across James’s face, splashing on his and Sirius’s robes. James returned fire just as quickly, and with in another flash, Snape was suspended upside down by his ankles. His robes flopped over his head, revealing his pale skinny legs and a pair of worn underpants.

The crowd laughed loudly now, James, Sirius, and Peter with them. Even Lily’s face twitched in a small smile, something that was more familiar to Harry than her scowl. Her inability to stay mad at James for terribly long was as constant in Harry’s life as his scar. Harry wondered, again, if perhaps they were dating, and this exchange was some sort of joke for the two of them.

But she managed to hold onto her anger a little longer. “Let him down!”

“Certainly,” said James, and he released the hex.

Snape crumpled to the ground, but before he could get another hex off, Sirius Petrified him, and he fell to the ground, flat and stiff.

“Leave him alone!” Lily shouted once more. She pulled her wand out now, and leveled it at James’s face.

“Ah, Evans, don’t make me hex you.” James did not seem concerned. Harry thought perhaps he should be.

“Take the curse off him, then!”

James sighed an undid Sirius’s curse. “There you go,” he said as Snape stood, “you’re lucky Evans was here, Snivellus —”

“I don’t need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!”

The crowd gasped, but it did not seem to be with shock at the word itself. All eyes turned to Lily with a mixture of excitement and anticipation. Harry wondered how often that word had been thrown around while his parents were in school.

Lily lowered her wand. Her anger was gone, and her voice was cold. “Fine. I won’t bother in the future. And I’d wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus.”

James raised his wand. “Apologize to Evans!” he shouted at Snape.

Lily put her wand back in James’s face. “I don’t want you to make him apologize,” she shouted. “You’re as bad as he is.”

“What? I’d never call you a — you-know-what!”

“Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your
broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can — I’m surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat had on it. You make me sick.”

There was a loud “oooh” from the crowd as Lily turned on her heel and stomped away. A few of the girls clapped. Not dating, Harry finally decided.

“Evans!” James called after her. “Hey, Evans!”

But she did not turn her head an inch.

“What is it with her?” James asked. Harry could not decide if he sounded exasperated or lovesick, but it certainly wasn’t as casual as he usually sounded.

Sirius seemed entirely unconcerned. “Reading between the lines, I’d say she thinks you’re a bit conceited, mate.”

Harry watched, dumbstruck, as James, now looking angry, turned back to Snape. He was surprised that Snape had not retaliated with another hex yet, but he was staring after Lily with his face as shocked as James’s had been while Lily listed his faults. There was a flash of light from the end of James’s wand, and Snape was once again upside down.

“Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?” James asked.

Harry was not sure he wanted to see anymore. He’d known his father wasn’t the nicest person in school, but he had not imagined it was this bad. He had not imagined that Snape’s anger and bitterness could be so justified.

But Snape had hexed James in the face. Snape had called his mother a Mudblood.

Harry wanted to follow Lily. He wanted to chase after her memory, but she was already blurring at the bottom of the hill. Harry glanced back at James and Sirius, milking the cheers of the crowd, at Peter, egging them on, at Remus, doing his best to stay apart and invisible, at Snape, fumbling to get a grip on his wand, and decided he didn’t want to be here anymore.

But Harry did not know how to leave memories. He’d only ever been dragged out of the Pensieve by someone else. So he decided to just follow Lily anyway. He didn’t know what would happen if he did.

Harry headed down the hill after Lily, and as she stepped into the castle, she stepped into darkness. Harry did not know what was waiting for him on the other side, but he stepped into the darkness, too.

Suddenly, he was standing in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, at the top of the staircase, the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Snape was there, and Lily too, but now Lily was in her dressing gown, arms folded over her chest. She glared at Snape with a similar fury to that morning, but it was now tempered with tiredness.

Harry wondered how he’d ended up here, and how close to this memory the last was. He wondered if by following Lily, he’d stepped into Snape’s next memory of her.

“I’m sorry,” Snape said.

“I’m not interested,” she said.
“But I’m sorry!”

“Save your breath. I only came out here because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here.”

“I was,” Snape said. “I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just —”

“Slipped out?” Lily rolled her eyes. “It’s too late. I’ve made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends — you see! You don’t even deny it! You don’t even deny that’s what you’re all aiming to be! You can’t wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?”

Snape tried to formulate a protest, but he did not seem to have the words.

“I can’t pretend anymore. You’ve chosen your way, I’ve chosen mine.”

“No, listen! I didn’t mean —”

“To call me a Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus, why should I be any different?”

And with the same look of contempt and finality that she had had with James just before, she turned away and went back to her common room, leaving Snape floundering for excuses.

Harry had the sudden, daring thought that if he followed Lily, he would keep seeing her in Snape’s memories. He ran after her, but as the portrait door closed behind him, he was left in complete darkness.

A sudden flash of white light cut through the pitch black. Harry blinked, stunned by the shock of the light. His vision slowly cleared, but instead of showing him Lily, Harry saw Dumbledore.

Snape knelt before him, reeling from a spell. Harry heard his wand clatter on the ground several feet away. “Don’t kill me,” he pleaded.

“That was not my intention.” Dumbledore’s voice was like steel. Harry had never heard Dumbledore speak so sternly before. It was like each word was frozen before it touched the air.

“Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?”

Snape wrung his hands. He looked panicked, his long dark hair whipping around him in the howling wind.

“No — no message! I’m here on my own account! I — I come with a warning — no, a request, please —”

“What request could a Death Eater make of me?”

“The — the prophecy… the prediction… Trelawney…”

“Ah, yes.” Dumbledore’s face remained unchanged, but Harry thought his voice seemed to gain an edge, like anger, but it remained as cold as before. “How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?”

“Everything — everything I heard! And that is why — it is for that reason — he thinks it means Lily Evans!”

“What do you think you are doing, Potter?”
A hand tightened around Harry’s arm, nails digging into his skin, as Dumbledore replied, “The prophecy did not refer to a woman. It spoke of a boy born at the end of July —”

Harry was dragged away from the vision, pulled upwards and away from this memory. Echoing over the howling wind, he heard Snape’s desperate cry, “You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down — kill them all —”

And Harry, with a gasp, found himself back in the dungeons of Hogwarts, reeling from everything he had just seen and heard, staring up into the face of a furious Snape.

“You idiot boy!” Snape shouted at him, shoving him away from the Pensieve.

Harry stumbled backwards, shoes sliding against the stone floor.

“Do you know what this could cost us? What does it take to make you understand? Your mind is vulnerable, your mind is weak, and everything you know is something Voldemort could know! You are not important, you do not need to know every secret, and you have put many, many lives in danger with what you just saw. What else did you see?”

Harry did not know how to answer that question. He had seen a lot more. Guilt ate its way through his stomach as he processed everything Snape said. But it was Snape, and he could not let that guilt show on his face, not even knowing who Snape used to be. Instead, he reached for the easier emotion, anger.

“If you would teach me properly,” Harry snapped, “instead just assaulting my mind over and over without —”

“Is that what you think?” Snape’s fury suddenly went cold. “Because something is hard for you to accomplish, the fault is mine? You’re as arrogant as your father.”

When Umbridge had said it, Harry had been proud. Now, with the memory of his father bullying Snape, he just felt ill.

“I’m not —” but his protest was weak. He didn’t know how to defend himself, and he certainly couldn’t defend his father.

“Get out.”

“But —”

“Get out!”

Harry did not know what else to do. He grabbed his bag and ran. He did not stop running when he got to the top of the dungeon, nor the entrance hall, nor the marble steps towards Gryffindor Tower. It was three floors later that he finally leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

The running had cleared his head a little, allowed him to sort through all he had seen. He was still upset with his father and Sirius and Remus, and he still wished Lily hadn’t hated James so much. He remembered though, something he hadn’t seen in the Pensieve. Something he had learned about Snape by accident. Something he had seen two years ago on a warm summer night.

Snape’s patronus was a doe.
Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Chapter Summary

Harry tries to find answers. He gets some.

Chapter Notes

Hello! So glad to have another chapter so soon after the last one, and I really like this chapter. Lots of good things in here. I had fun writing it. Hope you enjoy it. Looking forward to writing a surprise alternate perspective for the next chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry did not go straight back to his dormitory. He did not want Neville to ask why he was back early, nor Ron to ask if everything was alright, nor Dean and Seamus to give him funny looks. Though he was not entirely certain it was safe since Umbridge had discovered the D.A., he headed to the Room of Requirement. Harry paced the hallway across from the tapestry, picturing somewhere comfortable and quiet, somewhere he could think over everything he had seen in Snape’s memories. The door that formed in the rock was not like the door that had led to their Defense Against the Dark Arts sessions. This door was smaller, less ostentatious. It did not beg images of challenge and glory. In fact, Harry thought, it looked oddly like the door to his bedroom at home.

He pushed it open, and inside was something between the Gryffindor common room and the library. There was a warm, crackling fire, with a plush chair beside it. One wall was lined with books, but not the dry old sort he might find in the library below. There were adventure books and storybooks, the sort Harry used to sit and read for hours at home, on days where the weather wouldn’t let him outside to play on his broom. He wondered where they had come from, how so many books could have ended up here. Did the Room of Requirement create them, or were they already here, compiled after years and years of students coming and going, leaving books in lost corners and under desks. As Harry approached the fire, he felt, for a moment, as if the fire smelled like the Gryffindor common room — warm, toasty, with a dash of cinnamon — but once he was comfortably seated, he noticed an earthier scent. His heart seemed to grow both heavier and lighter at once before he even realized why.

It smelled like home.

Harry hadn’t been home since August, and he realized now just how badly he wanted to be there. Not just with his parents, not just with Remus and Sirius, but actually home, in his own room, in his own kitchen, in his own yard. Even the Room of Requirement couldn’t give him all that.

At least he could still talk to his parents.

Harry pulled the mirror out of his pocket, but “Dad” fell dead on his tongue as soon as he thought it. He wasn’t sure how he could face his father after what he had seen in the Pensieve.
The one good thing was that at least Snape hadn’t seemed to realize just how much Harry had seen. Snape had found him only in time to see the exchange with Dumbledore. Harry could not imagine how furious Snape would have been if he knew everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve. It had been difficult enough to watch Snape be bullied purely on the grounds that he did not like to see his father or Sirius behaving so horribly. On top of that, feeling pity for Snape of all people was a horrible enough feeling without Snape knowing Harry felt it.

And then there was the exchange with Dumbledore… Harry had so many questions. But he could not ask Dumbledore about it. He certainly couldn’t ask Snape. He wondered if his parents had any answers.

Harry looked at his reflection in the mirror and, for the first time in his life, felt uncomfortable to notice just how much he looked like his father.

“Mum?” he said cautiously. “Mum are you there?”

The surface of the mirror shimmered, and, for a brief moment, Harry thought he was looking at his own reflection again. His stomach twisted as he realized he was looking up at his father. James’s face lit up as he saw Harry. “Hey, Snitch! How are you? Everything alright over there?”

He was smiling, but his eyes looked grim.

Harry tried to smile back. “Er — is Mum there?”

“She went down for a nap a little over an hour ago. Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” Harry was not sure he sounded very convincing. “I just — I need to talk to Mum.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Er. No. It’d better be Mum.”

James frowned. “Alright, if you’re sure. Is it about Cho Chang?”

Harry felt his cheeks grow warm. “No — it’s just, it has to be Mum.”

“Okay, okay. Here, talk to Sirius while I go get her.”

Harry caught a glimpse of the chandelier over the dining room table as the mirror changed hands, and then he was looking at Sirius, who he also did not want to see.

“Hey, Harry.” Sirius’s cavalier grin was so identical to the grin he’d sported as he’d approached Snape all those years ago that Harry felt his stomach twist itself up into a knot.

“Hi.”

“Things okay over there? We’ve been worried about you, ever since Dumbledore came by.”

Harry adjusted himself in the chair, trying to get comfortable, but his discomfort wasn’t with the chair. “It’s alright,” he said. “Umbridge is her usual self. She had me come to her office for tea and try to get me to tell her where Dumbledore was, but I didn’t drink the tea. Then Fred and George set off a bunch of fireworks and made her first day miserable trying to put them all out.”

It was a little easier, talking about something normal, something that Sirius would find as funny as Harry had found in the moment. But Sirius didn’t seem amused. His smile darkened into a frown.

“Harry, are you saying that Umbridge tried to poison you?”
“I don’t know. Maybe? I didn’t drink it, so maybe it was fine.”

“Do you need to come home? Occlumency lessons be damned, we’ll find a way to teach you here if you need to come home.”

Harry wondered if he would even have Occlumency anymore, now that he’d been thrown out of Snape’s office. Snape hadn’t said, and Harry hadn’t asked. Harry was certain he didn’t want to ask.

“I think I’m okay here,” Harry said.

“Are you sure? If you need any — Ah, here’s your mum.”

The room shifted in the mirror as it was passed again, and then Harry was looking at his mother. She was wearing a robe and her eyes had dark circles under them. Harry felt bad for waking her.

“Harry? Is everything alright?”

Harry could not decode his father’s reply, but he recognized his voice, arguing with Lily.

“I don’t know,” Lily said, “but just go.”

Harry heard the sliding of the chairs against the wood floors and watched his mother raise her eyebrows until he heard the click of a door.


Harry shook his head. “No, it’s not about Umbridge.”

His mother looked so tired. He felt stupid for bothering her with something like this. It suddenly seemed so silly to be upset by what he’d seen in the mirror. He knew his father, and he knew Sirius. They were good people. There was no telling how clouded Snape’s memories were. He suddenly regretted this call.

“What is it, Harry?” Her voice grew soft. It reminded Harry of how she would sound when he scraped his knees running around in the gardens at home. That’s all this was, really. Just a scraped knee.

“I… saw something in my Occlumency lessons tonight,” he finally said. “It was — it was one of Snape’s memories, I guess.”

Lily frowned. “You mean you reversed the Legilimency? That’s very skilled, Harry.”

Harry had done that, but not tonight. It made him uncomfortable to hear her praise, and he hurried onto the rest of the story. “I saw you, when you were fifteen, taking your O.W.L. exam. Because Snape was there, too, you all had it together.”

“I remember.”

“I — I saw Dad too. You always said Dad was awful in school, and I guess I thought, I don’t know, I thought you were exaggerating.”
“What did you see, Harry?” Her voice was so soft, so comforting, it was like getting into a bed with Heat Charms stored in the blankets. Harry remembered when he was twelve and he’d climbed into her lap and spilled all his worries about being the Heir of Slytherin. He wished he could do that again.

Harry told her everything he had seen in Snape’s first memory, eager for her to put a bandage on it all, explain it away, make it stop hurting. He wanted his mother to kiss it and make it better, like any other small wound he’d endured. When he finished, she wore a faraway look, and he could not tell if it was a sad faraway look or if there was a smile on the corner of her lips. Somehow, it looked like both.

“I do remember that day,” she said. “But you know who your father is now, and who Sirius is now. Everyone’s a little stupid at fifteen.”

“I’m fifteen!”

“And your father and I are so proud that you’re better than we were.”

“You were fine. You stood up to Dad. Only… you were so angry at him. You hated him.”

“No, I didn’t.” Now she was definitely smiling. "Couldn’t let him know that, though, his head was big enough as it was. He didn’t need me to stroke his ego. We didn’t start dating until our seventh year, after he’d grown up a bit.”

“But you were friends with Snape, weren’t you? I remember… it was only a flash, but there was a girl, when he was a kid. You guys were friends, weren’t you? And he tried to apologize for what he’d said.”

“It was one apology too many. I can forgive accidents and mistakes, but not consistent behavior.” Lily seemed to be looking somewhere beyond the mirror, but Harry didn’t think it was at anything particular. “We grew up together, but we fell into different circles at school. We sort of fell apart somewhere between fourth and fifth year. He chose his friends and their… values. And I chose mine.”

“But you defended him.”

“Of course I did. I was a Prefect, and your father and Sirius needed to be taken down several notches.”

“Remus didn’t defend them.”

“And I properly scolded Remus for not keeping your father and Sirius in line. I did that quite a lot, if I remember correctly. You can ask Remus about that, too. I’ve never really thought of myself as bossy, but looking back….”

“But — Mum, I think… I think Snape loved you, or still loves you even.”

Lily laughed, and Harry probably would have done the same if anyone had told him that. She laughed until there were tears in her eyes. The mirror shook in her hand as she shook with laughter. It took her a moment to get her breath back under control.

“Oh, Harry, what would make you say that? Severus and I were friends when we were children, but just because he might have —”

“His Patronus. I saw it, back when I had to save Sirius and Regulus and, er, myself. It’s the same as
yours. I thought... you know, the legend about matching Patronuses and soul mates.”

Lily shook her head. “That’s just a legend.”

“You and dad have matching Patronuses,” said Harry stubbornly.

“Then so do Severus and your father. Or so do you and Severus. That doesn’t mean anything. It’s only a manifestation of your happiest memories, given a corporeal form.”

“But I saw — I saw one other thing. I saw Snape begging Dumbledore to save your life. He left Voldemort because he wanted to save you.”

Lily sighed and pressed her finger tips against her forehead. Harry was struck again by how tired she looked, and he thought perhaps he should just tell her goodnight and let her go.

“I’m sorry, Mum, I —”

“Harry, if Severus wanted to save my life, he never should have joined up with Voldemort in the first place. If you truly love someone, friend or more, you support and protect them.” She sighed and shook her head. “But you don’t need to be told this. You already know. You’re a very good friend to your friends, Harry, and you’ve chosen your friends well. I used to worry about you, because, well, it was so hard for me for so long. But you’ve done well. I’m very proud of you, and your father is too.”

“Oh... thanks.”

“I mean it. Now, was that all? I can see how seeing something like that would be distressing. Your father was, well he was certainly a handful. And Sirius wasn’t any better. And together they were worse. Sirius always says I made your father better, but I don’t think that’s true, maybe a little. He got better on his own. And then he made me better. You know, Sirius mentioned you went on a date, but he wouldn’t spill any details. Are you going to tell your father and I about her?”

“We broke up,” Harry said bluntly. “She wasn’t a good friend.”

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry —”

“No, Mum, it’s fine, but — I have to ask you about something else. Something else I saw in Snape’s memories.”

“What is it?”

“He said — he mentioned Professor Trelawney, and a prophecy.”

Lily said nothing, but her face seemed to go pale.

“I — I didn’t hear it, but Snape said — he said something about a boy born at the end of July. And Snape said ‘her son’ and he was talking about you, and I’m born at the end of July, and —”

“Harry,” Lily interrupted in a slow, steady voice. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. This is very, very important.”

Harry felt like the fire in the fireplace must have gone out, because a chill seemed to creep over him from the outside in. It had been a long time since he’d seen his mother look this worried. She so often leaped to anger, but this time she did not seem to be masking her fear.

“How did you see this?” she asked.
“In Snape’s memories.” He bit down on his lip.

“Snape let you into his mind that far? He said he would protect —” She took in a deep breath and her nostrils flared. Harry was afraid to tell her the whole truth.

“How well are your Occlumency lessons going?”

“Fine, I think.” Harry had always been a terrible liar, especially to his parents, who knew him so well.

“You’re not having dreams anymore?”

“I’m not having anymore nightmares.”

“What are you dreaming about?”

“Um, Quidditch.”

“Harry.”

He let out a deep breath. “It’s this corridor in the Department of Mysteries — I can’t help it! I see it every night, and it’s not getting better with Occlumency, it’s getting worse. I told Dad, but he said it was fine, that it was probably normal at first, but it isn’t getting better. Snape’s a horrible teacher, and what does it matter, anyway? It’s just a corridor —”

“Harry! It’s vital that you learn Occlumency. The only reason you’re even still at school is so you can continue learning Occlumency. I know it’s hard. I’m terrible at it, or I’d teach you myself. You can’t keep having these dreams, please, I need you to focus on your lessons.”

“How can I? With all these reviews for O.W.L.s, and Umbridge, and Cho, and — and I don’t even think Snape is going to want to teach me after what I saw in the Pens —” Harry cut himself off before he could finish, but the damage had been done. His mother was too clever to let that pass by unnoticed.

“In the what?”

“In the… Pensieve.”

“You went snooping into Snape’s memories and saw all that?”

“Yes, but Mum, I’m sorry — I am, and I wish I hadn’t seen all that with you and Dad, but I had to know, because Regulus said —”

“What on earth does Regulus have to do with any of this?”

“He doesn’t trust Snape.”

“Of course he doesn’t trust Snape. They don’t like each other nor trust each other, but neither do Sirius and Snape, so I don’t understand why you would listen to Regulus instead of me, or your father, or Dumbledore, for heaven’s sake, Harry! We are doing everything we can to make the best of a terrible situation, and it would certainly help if you would work with us!”

Harry could not believe just a few minutes earlier, his mother had been telling him how proud she was of him. He felt shame in his very core, which was not a very familiar feeling. Harry so very rarely disobeyed his parents, and when he did, he did it knowing he was making the right decision. This time, he already knew he was in the wrong. He was wrong to snoop in Snape’s memories, and
he had paid for it with that vision of his father. Now it felt like his mother was rubbing salt in the wound.

“I am sorry,” he said. He truly meant it, and he hoped she knew that. It did not seem to abate her temper at all.

“Harry, I… I need to talk to your father about this, and we’ll have to talk to Dumbledore.”

“Please don’t tell Dad —”

“Either you learn Occlumency or you come home. Dumbledore, your father, and I all want you to be safe from Voldemort. I want you to stop having these dreams. We also want you to be safe from Umbridge. But if I can’t have both, I’ll get at least one.”

“I… I think I’d rather come home than learn Occlumency.”

Lily pressed her lips together, but it looked more like she was trying not to cry than hold in her temper. “I wish that were the better choice, but Voldemort is the more dangerous threat to you. Someone’s going to have to talk with Snape to start your lessons again. If he refuses — and, honestly, after such an invasion of privacy I wouldn’t blame him —”

“He invades my mind every time, looking at all of my private thoughts!”

“That is neither here nor there right now, Harry.”

“What does it matter if I keep having stupid dreams? It’s just a hallway —”

“It matters because your father and I have asked this of you. Because Dumbledore has asked this of you. You know your father and I don’t often tell you to just trust us, but this is one of those times you need to trust that we know what’s best.”

“If you would just tell me —”

“If you would learn Occlumency, we could. But you haven’t. Harry, I’m sorry, this is the situation we are in right now and there is nothing else to be done about it. You’ll just have to accept it.”

Harry had certainly not expected this conversation with his mother to devolve into a fight. He could not remember how many times he had fought with his parents as a child — it seemed so infrequent. And yet, this year, it seemed like they could hardly talk to each other without arguing over something.

“Someone will talk to Snape,” she said, when Harry said nothing, “and we’ll figure out where to go from here. And can you promise me something? Can you promise to do your best in Occlumency? I know you’ve struggled in Potions, but Harry, I need you to be safe. I need you to promise me you’ll give it your best, and promise me you won’t leave the grounds of Hogwarts, not for anything.”

“I already promised you that,” he said dully.

“Promise me again.”

“Okay, I promise.” Harry intentionally remained unspecific. He did not think he could do any better in Occlumency. He did not think he wanted to. In his dreams, he was so close to seeing what Voldemort wanted. Surely that would help the Order. But hadn’t Snape told him his dreams weren’t important to the Order? And Snape had seen all of them, except for the most recent….
“Harry,” Lily said, “you know I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mum,” he said, though it felt half-hearted.

“Get some sleep, and try not to have anymore of those dreams.”

“Sure,” he said, as if he could help it.

The mirror went dark, and then Harry was looking back at his own face. He didn’t like how furious and upset he looked. It was one thing to be angry with his mother; it was another to know just how awful those feelings looked on him. He set the mirror aside and ran his hands over his face. He needed to go upstairs. He needed to go to bed.

He looked over at the fireplace, still crackling away. It no longer felt warm and comforting. He’d gotten too used to the smell of the room by now and could no longer distinguish it as “home.” He felt miserable in his core.

With all his remaining energy, Harry got up and left the Room of Requirement, hiking up the last set of stairs to the Gryffindor common room. His roommates were sound asleep and the dormitory dark when he returned. Neville’s snores were steady and masked Harry’s shuffling as he changed into his pajamas. He laid down, and it seemed as soon as his head hit the pillow, he was once again pulled into the corridor.

“Mum doesn’t want me here,” he mumbled, mostly to himself. His scar burned as he thought it, and as he stepped into the most recent room, with rows and rows and rows of glowing glass balls, the light from the glass seemed to shimmer. But curiosity overwhelmed him and he plunged forward — just a little farther. It was nearby. It had to be.

—— —— ——

In the morning, Harry wasn’t sure he felt any better about what he’d seen in the Pensieve, nor his conversation with his mother. His head ached from his dream, and he felt tired, like he hadn’t truly slept at all.

At the least, today marked the first day of Easter holidays. While the younger students ran out on the grounds to play in the warming spring air, chasing each other across the hills, the older students curled up in the library and their respective common rooms, studying furiously for their exams.

“Six weeks?” Ron asked, incredulously. “How can there be six weeks until our O.W.L.s?”

Hermione was going through Ron’s planner, marking out review schedules for them, color coded by subject.

“How can that come as a shock?” she asked. “We’ve been doing nothing but preparing for our exams.”

“There’s been a lot going on,” Ron said defensively.

Hermione handed him back his planner and set to work on Harry’s.

“You’ve given me a night off every week!” Ron said, flipping through the color-coded pages.

“That’s for Quidditch.”
Ron slumped down in his chair. “What’s the point? We’ve got as much chance of winning the Quidditch Cup this year as Dad’s got of becoming Minister of Magic….”

Harry could not disagree, so he said nothing as Hermione handed him his planner. He flipped through it with a frown.

“You gave me a night off every week, too. Are you expecting me to get detention with Umbridge?”

“That’s for Occlumency,” she said. “I know it’s not consistent, but you can move things around if you need to to fit it.

“Oh. Right.” Harry closed his planner.

He had not yet told Hermione and Ron about what had happened last night. For one, he did not want to tell them how awful James and Sirius had been during their years in school. For another, he did not want to continue his Occlumency lessons.

“Did everything go alright last night?” asked Ron. “You got back late.”

“Fine,” Harry said. “Just talked to my Mum before coming back.”

Hermione’s eyes did a quick scan of the common room before she asked, “How is everyone there?”

“Fine, I guess.” Harry shrugged. “She looked tired,” he added after a second thought, “really tired.”

“Did she say anything about Umbridge?”

“No, we didn’t talk about Umbridge.” Harry wondered if he should tell Hermione at least what he’d seen about a prophecy. His mother hadn’t answered any of his questions about it, only insisted he continue studying Occlumency. But if he told Hermione he’d have to tell her how he’d seen it.

“Was it…” Hermione paused. “Was it about Cho? I saw her this morning and she looked really miserable too. Have you two had a row again?”

Harry’s fight with Cho felt like a lifetime ago, but she was a very convenient excuse for the moment. “Oh — yeah, we have.”

“What about?”

“Marietta — and Cedric, I think.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, in a tone so like his mother’s it made Harry uncomfortable. “Harry, I’m sorry. Did she break up with you for Cedric?”

“Why do you think that’s what happened?”

“No — I just, I thought you meant —”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re both just too busy for each other, I guess,” said Harry.

He turned over what his mother had said about James: “He made me better.” As awful as the young James in the Pensieve had been, Lily had insisted that he made her a better person. Harry felt like Ron and Hermione, more often than not, made him better, too. They encouraged him when he needed, did their best to comfort and support him — none of that seemed like something Cho would do for him. Was it only because he didn’t know Cho well enough?
Harry tried to imagine talking to Cho about everything that had happened last night, but it seemed like the best she could do would be to cry and tell him she was sorry about it, as she had done on their date, when he’d told her about Umbridge’s detentions. Perhaps, as awful as Marietta Edgecombe ratting out the D.A. was, at the least, maybe this was better for Harry and Cho.

It still didn’t feel good.

Harry spent the holiday shut inside, cramming for exams, and miserable. No one had come to tell him he was leaving Hogwarts, and no one had come to tell him there was an Occlumency lesson scheduled with Snape. More than once, Harry wondered if there was any point in studying for his O.W.L.s, or if he would just be leaving school.

“Of course there’s a point,” said Hermione, as the two of them started down from the common room. “Even if your parents decide to take you out of school you’ll still need O.W.L.s to continue with N.E.W.T. level courses and get any sort of decent career.”

“Do I really need a career?” Harry asked, adjusting his school bag, weighted with study materials. “I could just stay home, tend to the estate. That’s what my dad does. Or maybe I could go into Quidditch. Don’t need O.W.L.s for that.”

“Don’t be stupid, Harry, could you really be happy just doing that?”

Harry supposed not. “Hermione, the library’s this way.”

“Oh — I just need to stop by Professor Vector’s office to ask a question.”

“It’s the holiday. I’m sure the professors don’t want to see you any more than we want to be in class.”

“It’ll be quick,” she said. “I’ll meet you back at the library.” And she hastened down the left-hand corridor.

Harry did not relish studying alone in the library for any length of time, and knowing Hermione, her question would not be as hasty as she had just implied. It did give him an idea, though.

All holiday, Harry had been wondering how to bring up the strange prophecy he’d discovered in Snape’s memories. Someone had given a prophecy about him, and he did not know what it meant or what it was, but it had put his mother in enough danger that Snape, a Death Eater, had gone to Dumbledore for help. Hermione had just told him exactly who he ought to ask.

Harry headed downstairs, to the main floor of the castle, and down the west corridor to Firenze’s office. He was not sure if Firenze was spending his holiday inside the castle, but it couldn’t hurt to check.

He knocked on the wide door. After a moment, the door opened, and Harry had to look up to meet Firenze’s eyes. The centaur was nearly seven feet tall, and Harry’s had barely reached his chest.

“Harry Potter,” said Firenze, in his low, rumbling voice. “I was not expecting to see you.”

“But you teach Divination.”

His broad brow frowned for a moment, then he smiled. “Ah, you are attempting humor. I was going to remind you that we had reviewed the limitations of this skill quite heavily, but I see you did not forget it. Come inside, Harry Potter. Tell me what it is you wish to speak about.”
Firenze opened the door all the way and stepped aside for Harry to enter.

Like his classroom, his office was modeled after his forest home. Instead of stone, the ground seemed like soft earth, coated in dead leaves and small shoots of grass. Plants lined the walls, and their branches brushed against Harry’s robes and Firenze led him deeper inside, to a small sort of clearing. Here, Firenze tucked his long horse legs underneath him and sat on the floor. He motioned for Harry to sit across from him.

“You seem troubled, Harry Potter. But that is not unexpected for a young wizard at your age. I should remind you that it is against the rules for a professor to advise you on anything that is not related to the course material.” Firenze’s smile was grim, and a little bit daring. Harry supposed Firenze’s opinion of Umbridge was not any better than Umbridge’s opinion of him.

“I was wondering — well —” Harry sat down on the ground and adjusted his robes. “I was wondering what you know about prophecies.”

“Prophecies are dangerous things,” said Firenze, “particularly to wizards like yourself.”

“Why? Don’t they just tell you what is going to happen?”

“Have you ever heard a prophecy?” Firenze reached behind a nearby stone and produced a bowl. He rested it on a flat place near the top of the stone and waved his hand. There was a spark and smoke, and the room was filled with the scent of burning herbs.

“I think so — once. I was with Professor Trelawney, and her eyes got wide and went in the back of her head. I thought she was just pretending, but what she said came true.”

“What was it she said?”

“She said that Barty Crouch, Jr. would rejoin Lord Voldemort and help him rise to power, and that’s what happened.”

“Were those her words exactly?”

“Er — no. She said… the servant of the Dark Lord who uh, had been in prison for twelve years, I think, or something like that, would help him return. She definitely said ‘Tonight, before midnight,’ though, I remember that.”

“Prophecies are often deceptively specific. At the time you heard the prophecy, did you understand what it meant?”

“No. I didn’t even know Barty Crouch, Jr. was alive. Uncle Remus and I thought it was about Regulus Black.”

There was a faint smile on Firenze’s face as he breathed in the smoke of the herbs. “Ah, Remus Lupin? Even Little Lupin, trying to interpret a prophecy.” Firenze shook his head. “I expected him to know better.”

Harry had always wondered why so many people who had known Remus during his school years referred to him as, “Little Lupin,” when the Remus Harry knew was quite tall. But now he had seen Remus at fifteen: thin, frail, and almost sickly looking. Now he understood just what a difference the Wolfsbane Potion made.

“You see, Harry Potter, prophecies may seem specific — The Dark Lord’s servant returning before midnight to help him rise sounds quite clear. But yourself and even Remus Lupin could not discern
its true intentions. It is the folly of many wizards to interpret prophecies, either to prevent them or cause them. There may be many determinations of a single set of words.”

“But what causes a prophecy?” asked Harry. “Where do they come from? And are they always right?”

Firenze lifted the bowl and shook it slightly, eyes on the scorched leaves within. “This is a very difficult question to answer. Many wizards devote their life to this study, and I am sure you could find books in your libraries filled with more questions than answers in response to what seems like such a simple question.”

“So… could a prophecy not come true?”

“It seems to me that this prophecy you have spoken of is one that you have already heard and seen come to fruition, so it is explained and the mystery exists no longer.” Firenze set the bowl down. “Is there another prophecy you are concerned about, Harry Potter?”

Harry took a deep breath. He did not know Firenze well enough to know what Firenze would think of him searching Snape’s memories. He did, however, remember a fight he had seen between Firenze and Bane, where Firenze had declared himself against the evil that lurked in the Forbidden Forest, the evil that had turned out to be Voldemort’s spirit. At the least, he could trust that Firenze was on their side in the war.

“I saw… it was a memory,” Harry said, “that belonged to Professor Snape. I saw him and Dumbledore talking. Snape said that my mother was in danger from Lord Voldemort, because of a prophecy. Dumbledore said the prophecy was about a boy, born at the end of July. Snape said that Voldemort thought it was my mum’s son, which would be… me. He said that Voldemort was going to hunt my mother down. If there’s a prophecy about me out there, I want to know what it is.”

Firenze listened intently as Harry spoke. His face did not move an inch, and his eyes watched Harry’s in a way that was almost unnerving. He was quiet and still for a long while after Harry was done, too. His tail swished once, and then he finally spoke.

“The nature of prophecies is a dangerous business to engage yourself with, particularly about yourself. A boy born at the end of July sounds quite specific, and it seems that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named interpreted it as he wished. Tell me, Harry Potter, do you think you are the only boy to be born at the end of July?”

“Er… no. But maybe if it’s only about wizards….”

“You are the only wizard in your year to be born at the end of July?” Firenze quirked an eyebrow.

“I guess Neville’s birthday is a day before mine….”

“There are many other wizards in many parts of the world who are likely to be just as close to you in age. This is the folly of prophecies — explaining them before they have come to pass, trying to use them as causes of events — none of this is helpful. Prophecies are useful to us only as vague warnings, and perhaps they allow us to shore up defenses for tragedies, but it is not wise to consume yourself with explaining them before their time. They reveal their truths when they are ready, and not a moment before.”

“So it might not be about me after all.”

Firenze let out a deep sigh, the most horse-like sound Harry had ever heard him utter. “It does not
matter whether the prophecy is about your or is not about you.”

“But if someone prophesied I was, I don’t know, going to fall off my broom, shouldn’t I know about it?”

“And what would you do? Stay off your broom? Tie yourself to it each time you fly? Would you ever be able to enjoy flying again?”

“No, I suppose not….”

“And how would you know how high the fall was? Perhaps the prophecy is answered by one meter. Perhaps it is a hundred. Perhaps you fall and do not hit the ground. Perhaps you are caught. There is no sense in letting a prophecy consume your mind. Many things can be explained in the same few words. You must continue to live as you would. The truth will be revealed when all is done.”

“I’m not sure any of this makes me feel better.”

Firenze smiled. “Now you are beginning to understand Divination. It is not often a study that brings joy.”

Harry wondered if that was why Professor Trelawney was so obsessed with dark predictions of death and suffering. He supposed it could get tiring, constantly looking forward, and not knowing how to make sense of it all. “I think I get it. Thank you for speaking with me.”

“Of course, Harry Potter.” Firenze stood, and so did Harry. “It is always an honor to have you as a guest.”

“Thanks. Uncle Remus speaks highly of you, you know. He said you helped him out a lot.”

Firenze smiled. “As a rule, centaurs do not busy themselves with the affairs of humans, but I did not mind sharing our forest with such a kind and inquisitive young werewolf.”

It was odd to hear someone use the word “werewolf” so clearly, without hesitation of malice. Harry wondered what centaurs thought of werewolves, but he felt he had bothered Firenze long enough.

Firenze walked him to the door and wished Harry a good day. It was disorienting, stepping out of the forest-like room, back into the cold, stone halls of the castle. Harry took a moment to readjust his eyes from the dappled sunlight to the dim torchlight before striding off to the library. He wondered if Hermione had finished her question with Professor Vector.

She was not in the library, though, and Harry slipped into an empty table beside a window, just as a few Ravenclaw seventh years were vacating it. They left their books piled for Madam Pince to reshelve. Harry set them on an empty chair and spread his parchment out over the table.

His head was still spinning from everything he had discussed with Firenze. He felt certain that the prophecy must be about him, or why would Snape have been so certain that Lily was in danger? He wondered if his parents knew about the prophecy. Lily must have known about the prophecy — Snape, Dumbledore, James, and Lily. Perhaps Remus and Sirius. Harry thought, traditionally, the best person to get answers out of would be Sirius, and the best person to ease his mind about it all would be Remus. Harry wasn’t sure, though, if he was quite ready to speak to either of them, after what he’d seen of them in Snape’s memories.
“Harry, I’m talking to you, can you hear me?”

“Huh?” Harry looked up at Ginny, hair windswept, smelling like the familiar sweat and dirt of a Quidditch locker room. “Oh. Hi. How come you’re not at practice?”

Harry moved the leftover books from the empty chair to a nearby stool and Ginny sank into the seat beside him.

“It’s over,” she said. “Ron had to take Sloper up to the hospital wing.”

“Why?”

“We’re not sure, but we think he knocked himself out with his own bat.” She set a box wrapped loosely in brown paper onto the table. It had a bright red stamp on it that read, “Inspected and passed by the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.”

“Easter eggs from Mum,” she said. She pulled back the wrapping. “Here’s yours.” She handed one of the chocolate eggs, decorated in small, iced Snitches. “At least I think it’s yours. Could be Cedric’s, I s’pose.” Ginny checked the tag and handed it to him. “I think Mum sent all the kids eggs in one basket. Guess they’re all still together in London.”

Harry took the egg, and, though he had just spoken to his mother last night, wished there was some sort of handwritten note from her. According to the label, the egg was full of Fizzing Whizbees. He spun the chocolate egg on its end, watching it twirl until the oblong shape took over and it wobbled and fell on its side.

Ginny unwrapped her egg. “Is it about Cedric? I bet if you talked to Cho about —”

“I don’t want to talk to Cho.”

“Well, alright then.”

“How’s Michael Corner?” Harry broke off a piece of the egg and stuffed it in his mouth.

“Fine. Getting a bit obnoxious and braggy with the game coming up, but I guess that’s expected.”

Ginny took a bite of her egg.

Harry wondered what it would’ve been like if he and Cho were still talking, if he was the team’s seeker instead of Ginny. Would they have teased each other before the game? Maybe they would have had a better chance at all of this, if it hadn’t been for Umbridge, his Occlumency lessons, his dreams….

“Fat chance we have, I suppose,” Harry grumbled.

“If someone could just hide the audience from Ron… Maybe there’s some sort of Illusion Charm we could cast on him.”

“Confundus?” Harry suggested. “Make him forget the audience is even there?”

Ginny laughed, and Harry felt warmer than he had all week.

His warmth was quickly stamped out when a shrill voice shouted, “What do you think you are doing?”

“Damn.” Ginny jumped to her feet. “I forgot —”
Madam Pince, who swept past a stunned and startled looking Hannah Abbott, approached them with murder in her wrinkly eyes. “Chocolate! In the library! Out — out — OUT!”

With a wave of her wand, she chased Harry and Ginny out of the library, pelting them with Harry’s books and ink until the thick oak doors of the library slammed shut behind them.

They stopped there, both panting. Their eyes met and simultaneously the two burst into laughter.

As stressful as upcoming exams were, and everything else that was going on in Harry’s life, it seemed that Hogwarts was not done with him just yet. The Saturday before holidays ended, a notice went up in the Gryffindor common room.

**CAREER ADVICE**

All fifth years will be required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the first week of Summer term, in which they will be given the opportunity to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appointments are listed below.

Harry found his name at half-past two on Monday, right in the middle of Divination. He was disappointed it wasn’t during Potions. He’d rather miss out on lessons with Snape than Firenze.

In addition to the notice, there were collections of leaflets for the fifth years to browse, all describing different jobs and the class requirements for each one.

“I don’t fancy Healing,” Ron said, looking through one of the pamphlets. “It says here you need at last an E at N.E.W.T. level in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I mean… blimey, they don’t want much, do they?”

“It’s a very responsible job, isn’t it?” said Hermione. She had already gone through most of the pamphlets and was now looking at a brightly colored paper with the heading, “So you think you’d like to work in Muggle Relations?”

“You don’t seem to need many qualifications to liaise with Muggles,” she said. “All they want is an O.W.L. in Muggle Studies… ‘Much more important is your enthusiasm, patience, and good sense of fun!’” she read.

Harry was flipping through a pamphlet on banking. “Listen to this one — ‘Are you seeking a challenging career involving travel, adventure, and substantial danger-related treasure bonuses? Then consider a position with Gringotts Wizarding Bank, who are currently recruiting Curse-Breakers for thrilling opportunities abroad….’ They want Arithmancy, though. You could do it, Hermione!”

“I don’t much fancy banking,” she said, and picked up a pamphlet that said, “Have you got what it takes to train Security Trolls?”

Harry wasn’t sure that was a career that would hold much more interest for Hermione than banking. Harry reached for a pamphlet on a career in international news reporting, until he saw in the bottom corner it was through the *Daily Prophet*. He threw that pamphlet down.

The weekend passed too quickly. Harry disliked Mondays, filled with all four of his least favorite courses, but today seemed particularly terrible as it would be his first lesson with Snape since he’s peek into the Pensieve.

Snape, it seemed, was no different.
Harry set to work brewing his Invigoration Draught, and though he found it passable, when he filled a flask and corked it, Snape snatched it up before he could turn it in.

Snape held the flask up to the light of his wand. “Tell me, Potter, how many times did you stir?”

“Seven,” Harry said through tight teeth.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“The shade of this potion suggests you stirred eight times, possibly not even in the right direction.” Snape set the vial down on the counter and with a wave of his wand Vanished Harry’s potion. “Unacceptable work, Potter,” he said, and moved on to collect Malfoy’s potion without a word.

Harry tightened his jaw shut as he stuffed his things into his bag. All the guilt he’d felt for looking in the Pensieve felt burned out of him. What did it matter if Snape had been bullied by his father? Snape was a terrible Potions teacher and a terrible Occlumency teacher. Harry was never going to learn either subject if Snape was going to continue teaching him.

He was so furious, he forgot about his appointment with Professor McGonagall. It wasn’t until they were halfway down the west corridor, when Ron said, “What are you still doing here, mate?” that he remembered where he was supposed to be.

Harry ran upstairs to her office, bag weighed down with Potions supplies, and arrived only a few minutes late but completely out of breath.

“Sorry, Professor,” he said, closing the door behind him. “I had forgot —”

“No matter, Potter.” McGonagall flattened a sheet of parchment on the desk.

There was a small sniff, and Harry turned to see Professor Umbridge sitting in the corner. She had a smile on her face and a frilled collar that seemed stretched too wide around her thick neck, so that the frills were nearly flat.

“Sit down, Potter.” Her voice was not near as friendly as it had been on the many occasions Harry had stepped into her office, but Harry did not think that anything to do with him.

He sat down across from her, unfortunately with his back to Umbridge. He trusted McGonagall would be quick on the draw.

“Well, Potter,” McGonagall said, “this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into sixth and seventh years. Have you had any thoughts about what you would like to do after you leave Hogwarts?”

Harry, who had had many other things on his mind this last week, struggled to come up with an answer. The sound of Umbridge’s quill scratching on a clipboard behind him did not help.

“Er — I’m not sure. I know I’d like to continue Herbology, so I can take care of my family’s gardens. And Defense —”

Umbridge cleared her throat. Harry ignored her.

“— I think I might like to play Quidditch after Hogwarts.”

“You certainly could play Quidditch professionally, but you would need a good deal of practice.”
Umbridge cleared her throat again.

“I should also advise you,” McGonagall continued, as if Umbridge had made no noise, “as your Head of House, that Quidditch is very rarely a lifetime career, and few can make a living from it at all. Have you considered an alternative career?”

“Well, I had thought… maybe about being an Auror.”

McGonagall did not seem surprised by this statement, nor disapproving. She reached for a small, dark leaflet from a stack under her desk and turned it so Harry could read it.

“They ask for a minimum of five N.E.W.T.s, and nothing under ‘Exceeds Expectations’ grade. Then you would be required to undergo a stringent series of character and aptitude tests at the Auror office. The training after school is another few years, even. It’s a difficult career path, Potter; they only take the best. In fact, I don’t think anybody has been taken on in the last three years.”

Professor Umbridge coughed a third time, her quiet, high pitched cough.

McGonagall paid her no mind. “You’ll want to know which subjects you ought to take, I suppose?”

“Yes. Defense, I suppose?”

“Naturally. I would also advise —”

Umbridge’s cough was a little louder this time. McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment, took a short breath, then continued.

“I would also advise Transfiguration, because Aurors frequently need to Transfigure or Untransfigure in their work. And I ought to tell you now, Potter, that I do not accept any students into my N.E.W.T. classes unless they have achieved ‘Exceeds Expectations’ or higher at Ordinary Wizarding Level. I’d say you’re averaging ‘Acceptable’ at the moment, so you’ll need to put in some good hard work before the exams to stand a chance of continuing. Then you ought to do Charms, always useful, and Potions. Yes, Potter, Potions. Poisons and antidotes are essential study for Aurors. And I must tell you that Professor Snape absolutely refuses to take students who get anything other than ‘Outstanding’ in their O.W.L.s, so —”

Professor Umbridge coughed again, loudly enough to startly Harry.

McGonagall did not take her eyes off Harry. “May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?”

“Oh no, thank you very much,” she said in her syrupy voice. It made Harry feel as if he’d just cut his teeth against each other in the wrong way. “I just wondered whether I could make the teeniest interruption, Minerva?”

McGonagall’s jaw was clenched so tight, Harry wasn’t sure it moved, even as she said, “I daresay you’ll find you can.”

“I was just wondering whether Mr. Potter has quite the temperament for an Auror?”

“Were you?” McGonagall still didn’t look at her. “Well, Potter,” she continued, “if you are serious in this ambition, I would advise you to concentrate hard on bringing your Transfiguration and Potions up to scratch. I see Professor Flitwick has graded you between ‘Acceptable’ and ‘Exceeds Expectations’ for the last two years, so your Charm work seems satisfactory. You’re doing just as well in Herbology, if you’d like to use that for your fifth N.E.W.T. or Care of Magical Creatures
you might find equally useful. As for Defense Against the Dark Arts, your marks have been
generally high. Professor Lupin in particular thought you — are you quite sure you wouldn’t like a
cough drop, Dolores?”

“Oh, no need, thank you, Minerva,” Umbridge said with a small smile. “I was just concerned that
you might not have Harry’s most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts marks in front of you. I’m
quite sure I slipped in a note….”

“What, this thing?” McGonagall pulled a sheet of pink parchment from Harry’s folder with her
thumb and forefinger and held it almost at arm’s length. Harry wondered if it was so she could
read the thin, curled scrawl better, or if because she was avoiding the sickeningly sweet smell
attached to the parchment. She raised her eyebrows, then replaced the parchment in the folder.

“Yes, as I was saying, Potter, Professor Lupin thought you showed a pronounced aptitude for the
subject. Even Professor Moody marked you well, and a letter of recommendation from him would
not be amiss in this field. Obviously, for an Auror —”

“Did you not understand my note, Minerva?” Umbridge interrupted.

“Of course I understood it.”

“Well, then, I am confused. I am afraid I don’t quite understand how you can give Mr. Potter false
hope that —”

“False hope?” McGonagall kept her eyes trained on a spot just above Harry’s head, but she did not
turn to look at Umbridge. “He has achieved high marks in all his Defense Against the Dark Arts
tests —”

“I’m terribly sorry to have to contradict you, Minerva, but as you will see from my note, Harry has
been achieving very poor results in his classes with me.”

McGonagall’s upper lip twitched, like it wanted to curl back into a sneer, but she would not let it.
She finally turned and faced Umbridge. “I should have made my meaning plainer,” she said. “He
has achieved high marks in all Defense Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher.”

Umbridge looked like a candle that had been snuffed out. She sat back in her chair, face nearly as
pink as her bow, and began scribbling very quickly on her clipboard.

Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry. She looked almost as furious as Lily had when Harry
had told her he’d looked into the Pensieve. Harry was glad that anger was not directed at him this
time.

“Any questions, Potter?”

“Yes,” he said. “What sort of character and aptitude tests do the Ministry do on you, if you get
enough N.E.W.T.s?”

“Well, you’ll need to demonstrate the ability to react well to pressure and so forth. Perseverance
and dedication, because Auror training takes a further three years, not to mention very high skills in
practical defense. It will mean a lot more study, even after you’ve left school, so unless you’re
prepared to —”

“You’ll also find,” said Umbridge, her honey voice turned to ice, “that the Ministry looks into the
records of those applying to be Aurors. Their criminal records.”
“— unless you’re prepared to take even more exams after Hogwarts, you should really look at another —”

“— which means this boy has as much chance of becoming an Auror as Dumbledore has of ever returning to this school.”

“A very good chance, then.”

“Potter has a criminal record!”

“Potter has been cleared of all charges.”

Umbridge got to her feet. It did not do anything to make her more intimidating, as she was so short, but her fury lent a cruelty to her face that Harry was all too familiar with.

“Potter has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror!” she shouted.

McGonagall stood as well, and a much more impressive stature than Umbridge. “Potter,” she said, “I will assist you to become an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly I will make sure you achieve the required results!”

“The Minister of Magic will never employ Harry Potter!”

“There may well be a new Minister of Magic by the time Potter is ready to join.”

“Aha!” Umbridge pointed her short finger at McGonagall. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Of course! That’s what you want, isn’t it, Minerva? You want Cornelius Fudge replaced by Albus Dumbledore! You think you’ll be where I am, don’t you, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and Headmistress to boot!”

“You,” said Professor McGonagall, “are raving.” She closed the folder on her desk. “Potter, that concludes our career consultation.”

Harry grabbed his bag and hurried out of the room, not even daring to look at Umbridge. He could hear her continued shouts halfway down the hall.

Divination was over by the time he arrived, and he and Ron met up with Hermione in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Umbridge came storming in, breath heavy and face red.

“Blimey, what’s in her bonnet?” Ron whispered as they slid into their desks.

“No clue,” Harry muttered.

They opened up their books to read chapter thirty-four, or, more accurately, to stare at the title, “Non-Retaliation and Negotiation,” and not read a line more. Every so often, Umbridge shot a dark glare in Harry’s direction. Harry, for his part, kept his eyes on his book and turned the page every few minutes.

The length of this class was always torturous, but today it seemed even more so. The entire class let out a sigh of relief when the bell rang. Harry was looking forward to a pleasant dinner, and not thinking about Umbridge or Snape for the next forty-eight hours. He picked up his bag, intent on dropping his Potions supplies off in his dormitory then heading down to dinner when Umbridge cleared her throat. It was like a jolt went through his entire body just from the sound.

“Mr. Potter, might I have a word?” She seemed to be choking on her own sugary voice.
All seven of the other Gryffindor students stopped and turned. Sally-Anne Perkins had her hand on the door, but she didn’t open it. Ron took a step closer to Harry, so their shoulders were nearly touching.

“Yes, Professor?” Harry asked.

Umbridge’s eyes roved the students. “The rest of you can run along to dinner, now.”

“If you’ve got something to say to Harry,” said Seamus, “you can say it in front of us.” He looked to Harry, like he was looking for confirmation that his was okay. Harry thought it was more than okay.

She pressed her wide mouth into a thin line. “Well. Then. Mr. Potter, in regards to your Career —”

Someone screamed, muffled through the door. Sally opened it quickly, and everyone, Umbridge included, ran into the corridor. The sound of screams, shouts and general chaos, it seemed, were coming from upstairs.

Umbridge ran out of the room and up the stairs, as fast as her squat legs could carry her.

“Oh, no,” said Hermione, “what have they done now? She’s in her worst mood, too. Do you think Filch has caught them?”

“I don’t think Fred and George are worried about getting caught or not,” said Ron.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all followed the crowd of students up the stairs. Umbridge and Filch were still sorting the crowd out, some of them covered in a sappy, gooey substance. Warrington and Malfoy were moving quickly through the crowd, and by the time Harry and Hermione had wormed their way to the front of the crowd, they Inquisitorial Squad had caught their quarry. Fred and George were dragged forward and turned over to Umbridge. The crowd widened into a circle. In the middle stood the twins, who did not seem especially ashamed to be caught, and Umbridge, face nearly purple with the fury of her horrid day.

“So!” she said, half-out of breath. “So, you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?”

Fred glanced back over his shoulder at the walls covered in mud and sap. “Pretty amusing, yeah.”

George shrugged his shoulders and looked at her without a touch of fear in his voice. “I thought it was funny. I don’t think we’re the only ones, either.”

A few of the students — all of them out of sight — giggled in the crowd.

Filch elbowed his way forward, waving a piece of parchment over his head. “I’ve got the form, Headmistress!” he shouted. “I’ve got the form and I’ve got the whips waiting — Oh, let me do it now.”

“Very good, Argus,” she said. “You two,” she said, glaring at Fred and George, “are about the learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school.”

“You know what?” said Fred. “I don’t think we are.” He turned to George. “I think we’ve outgrown full-time education.”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that way myself,” George said.
“Time to test our talents in the real world, d’you reckon?”

“Definitely.”

And together, they pointed their wands down the hallway and shouted, “Accio Brooms!”

There was a crash from the hall behind them. Harry and the students around him flung themselves into the walls to avoid two broomsticks, one with a chain still bouncing along the floor, flew past them and into Fred and George’s waiting hands.

“We won’t be seeing you,” said Fred, as he mounted his broomstick.

“Yeah, don’t bother to keep in touch,” said George, climbing onto his own.

“If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated,” said Fred, “come to number 93, Diagon Alley — Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, our new premises!”

“Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they’re going to use our products to get rid of this old bat,” added George, pointing his wand at Umbridge.

“Stop them!” Umbridge screamed, but it was too late. Filch and the Inquisitorial Squad dove for the twins just as they kicked up into the air. Harry was pleased to see the iron peg knock Malfoy in the face as George took off.

“Give her hell from us Peeves,” Fred shouted, as he and George darted out of the school.

They were sent off to the sound of thunderous applause from the students, and even Peeves waved his belled hat and hollered after them.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always welcome!
Nymphadora Tonks is adjusting to adult life, and she thinks she's adjusting rather well. That doesn't mean it's easy.

Hello! Six months late, here is your chapter! It is LONG. 13,000 words & 34 pages long, so feel free to pace yourself, take a break in the middle and come back to it.

It's a perspective I've wanted to do for quite some time, and I'm glad I finally found an opportunity to get to it.

Please don't expect consistent updates just yet. I'm nearly at summer break, but I am taking a summer course and I will be doing some massive job hunting, as I've been unemployed for a year now. I also have a few other creative side-projects that aren't Harry Potter related, but I definitely want to let you all know about, so when those are launched this summer, I'll post it here with the chapter updates, and those will just be as often as I can. There's just SO MUCH happening in my life right now. I'm so glad I've found the time to put this chapter together. I love it quite a lot, and I hope you do too.

Nymphadora Tonks slumped low in her desk, head lolling against the wooden chair back. She resisted the urge to close her eyes, instead focusing on the paper airplanes that flitted over her desk, bearing their notices and messages to the various offices here on the second floor. The agile bits of paper were much more stimulating than the flat, immobile sheets of paper that littered her desk, and far less concerning than the lists, and photographs that covered the department pin board, its vain attempts to pin down the whereabouts of eleven dangerous and deadly Death Eaters more wearying than anything else in this office.

“Eyes front, Tonks!”

Gareth Robards’s loud, robust voice was as jarring as a sip of scorching cup of coffee. Tonks straightened suddenly in her chair, but her alertness was brief. As soon as the rush of energy was gone, she leaned forward on her desk, dropped her head into the palm of her hand and stared vacantly across the aisle of desks to Gareth Robards.

“Sorry, Robbie,” she said, and stifled a yawn. “Late night last night. Is it lunch yet?”

Robards frowned at her. Though she couldn't see his mouth behind his large, bushy mustache, his mustache seemed capable of expression all on its own. Currently, it was conveying a little bit of sympathy and a little bit of disappointment.
Tonks couldn’t help it. Things were hard and stressful and she was tired and stressed. Coming into work in the early morning after a late shift for the Order was bad enough. Coming in and finding out one of your co-workers had been hexed last night on a stakeout? Far worse.

“Any word on Savage?” she asked.

“Williamson and Proudfoot are there now,” Robards said. He gestured to the scroll sitting on the corner of Tonks’s desk, almost as if it hadn’t been touched since it had been given to her. “Have you finished that report yet?”

“It’s nothing.” She covered her mouth to hide another yawn. She reached for the scroll and opened it. “It’s a Regulus Black sighting that’s clearly Sirius. Listen, the witness said —” Tonks put on her best impression of her mother’s voice, “— I gasped when I recognized him, with his disheveled hair and disorderly clothes. I immediately grabbed my groceries and my wand to Apparate to the Ministry, and he gave me quite a rude gesture as I pulled out my wand.”

She dropped the affectation. “I’ve never read a more obvious case of mixed identity. We know Regulus Black prefers the finer things, like half of these escaped bastards, would never wear Muggle clothes, and surely he would keep a lower profile than flipping off some flustered old lady. I don’t want to waste my time pursuing this.”

“Any lead could be the lead that helps us catch these criminals.” Robards stood, his wide girth bumping against his desk as he did. “Coffee?” he offered, but Tonks shook her head.

Robards disappeared into the small break room that each department on their floor shared. Tonks pulled her pocket watch from her robes and watched the second hand tick, interminably slowly. She glanced at Rufus Scrimgeour’s closed office door and wondered what he’d say if she took a short day. The outlook on that wasn’t very promising. No one got short days anymore. If anything, it was frowned upon if you weren’t taking overtime.

Reluctantly, Tonks stood up and took her scroll to their department’s pinboard. The pinboard had been nicer to look at when it was just Regulus Black. Now, Tonks had made herself familiar with all ten of the recently escaped Death Eaters — everything from their past criminal activities to their known habits to their last words spoken on record.

Of them all, she was most used to the face of Bellatrix Lestrange, her very own aunt. Though Tonks had never met the woman, she’d had nightmares throughout her childhood about her crazy aunt appearing in the middle of the night and kidnapping her. Now, as an adult, she still had those nightmares, and they were worse because she had the maniacal, laughing face from Bellatrix’s mugshot to enhance her dreams.

Some days, Tonks thought she might sleep easier if she simply scorched Bellatrix’s face from their wall, just as her own mother had been scorched from Grimmauld Place all those years ago. But Tonks could already imagine the lecture that Scrimgeour, Shacklebolt, and Robards would all lay down on her. It wasn’t worth it.

Tonks carefully copied down the information on Regulus’s portion of the board — considerably smaller than it had been just two years ago when she’d become an Auror — into her scroll, highlighting the details of the “sighting” that conflicted with the details they already had about Regulus Black.

The bell announcing the lift echoed faintly through the office. Tonks turned to see Williamson and Proudfoot step out onto the floor. Both said hello to the secretary at her desk before making their way to their own desks, bleary-eyed, each with a coffee in hand. Even though neither of these men
were in the Order, the job these last couple months had been stressful enough on everyone.

Williamson was one of the oldest in the Auror office, one of a handful of Aurors who had survived the war ten years ago. His hair had supposedly gone white after his first duel with Voldemort. Now, he wore that white hair like a battle scar. He never cut it, and kept it tied back in a long ponytail. He passed Tonks with the barest of nods, eyes already on the stack of papers waiting for him.

The stack used to be higher. Williamson was responsible for a lot of the interdepartmental work required to keep the Auror office running. Before they’d hired their secretary a month ago, Williamson had done the paperwork alone. Now he had someone to help filter it, at least.

Proudfoot was a few steps behind him, the usual spring in his step absent. Tonks wasn’t sure he’d been his chipper self since the mass breakout from Azkaban. He still smiled when he saw her, at least.

She smiled back. “Wotcher. How is she?” Tonks asked.

“Savage? She’ll be alright.” Proudfoot leaned against the same desk Tonks was using for support. “They said she should regain the use of her wand hand tomorrow.”

Tonks let out a sigh of relief. “Good to hear. And the Prophet?”

“Not a peep, of course.” Tonks couldn’t tell if Proudfoot was pleased or displeased about that. “I get not wanting the population to panic, but….?” He took a sip of his coffee and shrugged his shoulders. “Others get paid more than me to worry about that sort of thing.” He finished his coffee and gave her a comforting nudge with his elbow, “Cheers,” and finished the walk to his desk.

Proudfoot had been the youngest in the department until she came along. He’d been the most patient with her as she learned the inner workings of the office and adjusted to the odd schedules. He’d also listened to her vent about her mother more times than he should have. In return, she’d heard all about his nephew he was so proud of. They hadn’t talked about family in a while, though. They hadn’t had the time.

Tonks checked her watch again. Maybe there was something wrong with it. Surely it had been longer than five minutes since she’d last looked at it. Unfortunately, a glance at the clock on Robards’ desk confirmed her own watch’s reading. She decided, at the least, she needed to get out of the office.

Tonks rolled the scroll shut and grabbed her coat. “I’m going to follow this lead up,” she announced. She wondered if she could get away with a proper look for Regulus Black around the dusty corners of Grimmauld Place — and maybe find a decent place for a nap.

Robards cut her plan short swiftly. “Take a partner.”

Tonks made a face. “It’s just down to Diagon Alley and back. No need for that.”

Proudfoot stood. “I don’t mind. I’ve got to check with a seller about Rookwood. We can partner with each other.”

“I really don’t need —”

“After what happened to Savage, no one is to head out alone,” Robards interrupted. “Scrimgeour’s orders.”
Tonks knew better to argue with that. She grabbed her coat. Proudfoot hadn’t even had the time to take his off yet.

As they passed the new secretary, Tonks smiled and said, “Wotcher, Anne.”

Anne Scrimgeour nodded to them as they passed, her sharp eyes, wide nose, and hair identical to her uncle’s, giving her the same lion-like look. She said nothing, though, and snatched another memo out of the air. Anne was nothing if not dedicated to her work and her career. She’d been an invaluable resource this past month, dismissing all rumors that she’d only gotten this position because of her family connection.

Once in the hallway, Proudfoot pushed the button for the lift. Here, out of sight of their superiors like Robards, Scrimgeour, or Shacklebolt, Proudfoot slumped his shoulders and leaned against the wall.

Tonks didn’t ask why. There was no need, not these days.

He straightened when the lift bell dinged, however, and once the golden gate had slid aside, Frank and Alice Longbottom disembarked.

“Morning Frank, Alice,” Proudfoot said, nodding at each. His friendly smile wiped clean all trace of his exhaustion.

Frank and Alice looked as if they’d taken on his weariness. Alice muttered little more than a “Hello,” as she passed. Frank paused and held the lift gate for them.

“Heading out?” he asked.

“Following up on Rookwood and Black.” Proudfoot stepped into the lift. “Late morning?”

“We stopped by the Department of Magical Education,” Frank said, face grim. “The Potters’ protest is growing. Before we know it, they’ll be sending Hit Wizards up to manage it.”

“Lovely,” Proudfoot said. “As if there isn’t enough going on.”

Frank shook his head and followed his wife into the office.

Tonks had heard about Lily’s violent outburst at Christmas, and, despite the look of apathy on Frank’s face, she suspected the Longbottoms supported the Potters’ petitions against the Department of Magical Education and Umbridge. Unfortunately, if they vocalized that support, they could risk losing their jobs.

Tonks stepped into the lift with Proudfoot. “Want to swing by level one and catch a glimpse of the chaos?”

Proudfoot’s shock could not have been more obviously fake. “Miss Tonks, are you suggesting we take time away from our work hours to follow up on personal business?”

Tonks grinned. “Wouldn’t even call it personal business. More like… personal curiosity.”

It was nice to see Proudfoot wearing his old smile as he pulled the lever for the first floor. The golden gate closed and the lift took a short trip up. Tonks and Proudfoot disembarked into possibly the most chaotic hallway in the Ministry of Magic.

The first floor was always busy, since the highest-level offices were up here, and there was never a
shortage of tasks to complete. Aides and assistants ran between offices, and it was difficult to dodge papercuts as folded memos swooped past at alarming speeds. In addition to the usual mess, there was an extra crowd of about fifteen adults, swarming the office for education.

Tonks saw James and Lily at the center of the crowd, writing notes on pieces of parchment and sticking it to the door. A few of the parents were even in Muggle clothes, and Tonks was impressed that James and Lily had managed to get Muggle parents into the Ministry of Magic.

A woman in dark, glittering robes, with thick dark braids pulled up in a high ponytail approached them.

“Pardon me,” she said, with a friendly smile, and handed out a small pamphlet to them. “I’m Moira Jordan. We’re protesting some of the new Educational Decrees put out by the Ministry of Magic. Do the two of you have children at Hogwarts? You must be aware of the impact all of these new decrees are having on the education of our children.”

Tonks held back a snicker as Proudfoot turned bright red.

“Er — Thanks.” Proudfoot didn’t seem to know what to do with the pamphlet.

“Did you know that all packages and letters to and from your children are subject to inspection? There’s every possibility your children’s letters are being censored.”

“We’re not —”

“Because of this censorship, you may not have been aware that the new Headmistress has allowed corporal punishment back into the school, and is actively using it against students.”

“Sorry,” Proudfoot tried again, “but we —”

“We’re organizing everyone’s complaints here and leaving them on the Headmistress’s door. The Ministry is taking them down each night, but we’re here each morning to protest. They can’t keep us quiet if we’re consistent and persistent! And the more voices, the better. As parents, it’s our duty to —”

“We’re not parents,” Proudfoot got out in a rush, face bright red.

Tonks struggled not to burst out laughing. She certainly hadn’t expected the trip up here to be this entertaining.

Moira blinked at them. “Oh. Still, your voice is important. Certainly you two will have children of your own soon and —”

“We’re not together — we’re Aurors. We just came upstairs to make sure everything was in hand.”

Moira pursed her lips, her friendly demeanor suddenly stiff and cold. “I see. No — you keep those pamphlets. Educate yourselves. Make sure you know exactly what sort of system you’re perpetuating.”

Tonks took Moira’s coldness in stride. She knew it was important to keep her position as an Auror, and that meant that some people weren’t going to be happy with her. People who criticized Fudge or believed in the Potters would extend their distrust of the Ministry to her. It was little to suffer in exchange for the help she could provide to the Order.

As Moira returned to the crowd of parents, Tonks made eye contact with Lily, but Lily made no
indication they were friends, and Tonks returned the favor.

“Um, personal curiosity satisfied?” Proudfoot asked. His red cheeks were finally beginning to fade to pink.

Tonks shrugged, an amused smile still playing around her lips. “Yeah. It was informative.”

Proudfoot pushed the button for the lift. The bell dinged and the gate slid open, but before Tonks or Proudfoot could step onto the lift, there was a very abrupt, “Excuse me! Important business for the Minister!” and Percy Weasley squeezed in-between them and into the lift.

Proudfoot and Tonks exchanged a look with raised eyebrows, and there was instant understanding between them as they stepped into the lift.

“Morning, Mr. Weasley,” said Tonks, as she and Proudfoot stepped into the lift.

Percy Weasley did not look up from the papers he was holding. “Yes, good morning.”

“Busy day?” Proudfoot asked.

“Quite.”

“Did you need the Atrium, Mr. Weasley?”

“The courtrooms. The Minister needs the judicial seal on these new educational decrees immediately. Couldn’t wait to have them Charmed down. Have to run them myself. The Minister only trust me with errands like this.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sure you’re quite invaluable to the Minister.” Proudfoot pulled on the lever, but instead of traveling down to ninth floor, the lift went down one floor to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Tonks stuck her head into the hallway and waved at Anne, but neither her nor Proudfoot got out. The gate closed, the lift descended, and stopped at level three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. No one entered the lift and it closed once more, this time descending to level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Again, no one stepped on nor off.

Percy Weasley stuck his head out to see if anyone was waiting, not no one was. “Is this lift broken?”

“Maybe we should call Magical Maintenance,” Tonks suggested, hiding a smile on her lips.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Proudfoot said. “We’re nearly halfway.”

Percy Weasley fumed quietly as the golden gates opened and closed on each level of the Department of Mysteries. Tonks and Proudfoot maintained cordial smiles, and chatted quietly about how thrilled they were to have Anne Scrimgeour to help out with their department’s paperwork.

Once they finally reached the Atrium, Tonks and Proudfoot did not disembark. A handful of people entered their lift. Two wizards in particular walked in, realized the lift was continuing down to the Department of Mysteries, and stepped back out.

The crowd sorted itself out, the gate closed, and Tonks very carefully slipped her wand from her
pocket and pointed it at the hem of Percy Weasley’s robes. It was nothing complex, just a Light Sticking Charm, enough to hold his robes down as he stepped forward.

And sure enough, as the gate slid open and the voice above announced the Department of Mysteries, Percy hurried forward, pushing his way through the small crowd. “Excuse me —” and he tripped over the hem of his robe.

Proudfoot caught him neatly before he hit the floor, but the papers that had been in his hands scattered throughout the lift.

“Careful,” said Proudfoot, putting Percy on his feet in the now empty lift. “You could have hurt yourself. You’re no good to the Minister that way, you know. You might want to slow down a bit.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Proudfoot.”

Tonks waved her wand and swept up the papers into her waiting hand. “Here you are, Mr. Weasley, sir.”

Percy adjusted his glasses and smoothed his robes. “Thank you, Ms. Tonks.” He took the papers from her a little meekly.

“Any time.”

Proudfoot and Tonks waited until Percy had turned the corner and the heard the door down to the courtrooms open and close behind him before getting back into the lift.

“Did you wipe the Minister’s signatures from the decrees?” Proudfoot asked.

“You know, I almost wasn’t sure it would work. I wonder if the last Junior Assistant intentionally forgot to mention how helpful a Preservation Charm could be on the Minister’s signatures. Weasley would’ve had to have learned that sooner or later. It shouldn’t take more than one trip all the way back upstairs to teach him that lesson.”

The two disembarked from the lift on the Atrium level, and waved to the security guard as they passed the large, gilded gates and the fountains, then took hands and Apparated to The Leaky Cauldron.

“Well,” Tonks slipped her wand back into her pocket, but kept her hand on it, at the ready, just in case, “I’ve got to check on Mae Westwind, the shopkeeper who was supposedly present at this Regulus Black sighting. What about you?”

“Brandy Buckworth carries a wine that Rookwood was known for being partial to. I’m investigating whether anyone’s bought it recently. Might give us a clue where the rotten bastard’s hiding.”

“Isn’t that up by the bank?”

“You’re right; let’s do yours first.”

Tonks noticed Proudfoot kept his hand in his wand pocket, too, as they nodded at Tom the bartender and slipped into Diagon Alley.

The street was busy, as expected on a weekday morning. Bells pinged as shop doors opened and closed around them; the trundle of wooden wheels on cobblestone echoed down the street. The chatter around them was loud, and Tonks kept her head on a swivel as they walked, eyes and ears
open for anything out of the ordinary.

It was a habit these days, and she was grateful Moody had been her mentor before he retired. The things she had thought were absurd during her training had proved useful in war time.

Mae Westwind kept a small fish stand on the south side of Diagon Alley, not far from the secondhand bookshop. She was known for the freshness of her catches; she went out to the sea early in the morning and had her stand stocked by ten. It was no surprise that there was quite a line of people already waiting to get their fish for the day.

“Auror privileges?” Padfoot suggested, gesturing to the front of the line.

Tonks shrugged. “It’s nice out. Do you really want to go back to that stuffy office and stare at the pinboard for the rest of the afternoon?”

Proudfoot laughed. “No, not particularly.”

As they got into line, Tonks asked, “How’s your nephew?”

“Danny’s great!” Proudfoot beamed like the sun. “Claire just signed him up for football lessons. His games start next week and I’ve said I’ll go cheer him on. She says he’s not quite old enough to understand the game, but he knows he’s got to kick the ball. It should be fun!”

Tonks laughed. “I’m not sure I even understand the game. My dad tried to explain it to me once, but I was only ever interested in Quidditch.”

“Claire says it’s pretty straightforward. But then her husband goes on about onsides or offsides or something and I can’t follow.”

“Does he know about you being magical?”

Proudfoot shook his head. “Claire didn’t think it mattered, since she’s… you know. But Danny got a hold of my wand last time I was there. Switched the color of his blankie. I switched it back before Claire saw it, but, well… maybe nothing will come of it.”

Tonks watched his hand slip into his breast pocket, where he’d hastily stashed Moira Jordan’s pamphlet. He didn’t pull it out, but he seemed distracted.

“How’s your family?” he asked suddenly.

“Same as ever,” Tonks laughed. “Mum worries and frets, Dad asks me not to make Mum worry and fret.”

“I imagine it hasn’t been easy for her since the breakout.”

“No, not at all.” Tonks’s hand tightened around her wand. She tried to think of an easy way to bring up her nightmares, or any of her long conversations with Sirius about family and Bellatrix, but she couldn’t seem to put her thoughts into words. Before she had a chance to change the subject, Mae Westwind was asking if they were interested in saltwater or freshwater.

“Neither,” Proudfoot said. “We’re following up on a lead.” He waved his wand and summoned a quill and parchment.

Tonks pulled the scroll from her coat. “We had a witch in about her sixties, big, cardinal-feathered cap, put in a sighting of Regulus Black yesterday evening. We’re just following up on her
“Ah, you’re Aurors, are yah?” Mae raised an eyebrow. “Slow on the search. I already had a boun’y hun’er in here asking abou’ him just mo’ ago.”

“We’ve got a lot of tips we follow up on, Mrs. Westwind. Do you mind telling us what happened?”

“Sure, I’ll tell yah what I told him, and I told him it was no Regulus Black at my stand, jes’ Sirius Black, plain as day. Wearin’ Muggle clothes n’ ever’thin’.”

“You’re absolutely certain it was Sirius Black?” asked Proudfoot.

“Sure, I know wha’ the Black boy looks like. Those Muggle pants, all torn up, stomping around like a crow in a sparrow bath.”

Tonks laughed, made notes on her report, and returned the scroll to her coat. “Thanks for your help, Mrs. Westwind. That certainly sounds like Sirius Black.”

“Sorry to take up your time,” Proudfoot said, and his quill and parchment vanished.

“You’re not going ta ask about any black cats?”

Proudfoot frowned, and Tonks stiffened.

“Cats?” Proudfoot asked.

“That boun’y hun’er was sayin’ Regulus Black’s got a familia’ followin’ him, a sleek black cat. Asked if I’d seen one and I tol’ him lotsa cats snoop around my fish, how was I ta know if one of ‘em was Black’s familiar? You Auror’s didn’t hear about that, then, did ya?”

“We haven’t heard any leads about Black having a familiar,” Proudfoot said. “That doesn’t match our records, or anything we’ve known about his preferred style of magic. Perhaps the bounty hunter was misinformed.”

Tonks did not think so, though. She thought that this woman hadn’t spoken with a bounty hunter at all, but a Death Eater. They were the only ones besides the Order of the Phoenix who knew Regulus Black had another form as a cat. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as she and Proudfoot said their goodbyes. That meant they had just narrowly missed a Death Eater. She wondered if that witch or wizard were still nearby, or perhaps the Death Eater had spotted two Aurors and left.

She couldn’t say anything about it to Proudfoot, though, not without revealing she had hidden information about Regulus Black.

Proudfoot checked his pocket watch. “What do you say to an early lunch after we check on this wine?”

Tonks shrugged. She could eat, and she had no objections to staying out of the office a little longer. “Lunch would be fine.”

Proudfoot picked up his pace a little, a fresh spring in his step, and Tonks felt her heart sink into her stomach. She wondered if she should say something to him or let it be. It was just lunch, after all. And, besides, maybe she should invest more time into her friendship with Proudfoot, instead of into a childhood crush that was going nowhere.
The bell on the shop door jingled as they entered, and an elderly witch came out from the back. Her robes were a deep burgundy, and her sleeves were embroidered with detailed stitches of green and gold vines. She wore small glasses on her nose, and took them off to squint at Tonks and Proudfoot.

“How can I help you two today?” she asked in a high, warbly voice.

“Good morning, are you Brandy Buckworth?” asked Proudfoot. “I’m Proudfoot, and this is my partner Tonks, from the Auror Office at the Ministry. We have a couple of questions about one of your wines.”

Mrs. Buckworth pinched her mouth so tightly her lips seemed to disappear into her wrinkles. “Well, get on with it, boy. If you’re not here to buy, you’re wasting my business time.”

“Uh — yes, Mrs. Buckworth.”

Tonks hastily summoned a quill and pen to take notes while Proudfoot asked questions, just as he had done for her a few minutes earlier.

“I was wondering if you still carried,” Proudfoot checked his notes, “the 1757 Unduplicated Braga Feitiço Port Wine? Did I say that right?”

The woman looked him up and down. “You didn’t, and I do, but I’m not sure you could afford it.”

“I only want to know if you’ve sold any this past month.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Why?”

“It might help us with an investigation.”

“It might help you? So you’re here wasting my time with a ‘might help’? You’re some Auror.”

“It’s just yes or no, Mrs. Buckworth. Have you or haven’t you sold any?”

“I might’ve. I’d have to check my store logs. I don’t remember every bottle of wine I’ve ever sold.”

Tonks resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Proudfoot, however, seemed to have the patience of a saint. “It would be really helpful if you could tell us who you sold it to.”

While Mrs. Buckworth made a show of pulling an old, thick book from behind the sales counter and thumbing through it very slowly, Tonks wrote down “unhelpful witness,” and glanced out the window.

She caught sight of a wizard leaning against the wall across the street. He looked innocuous enough, with his nose buried in a book, but she couldn’t see his face with the brim of his hat tipped down. Odd to be standing outside a shop, reading a book. They weren’t near Flourish and Blotts, either.

She wondered if she was being paranoid or if it was something to worry about. She knew what Mad-Eye Moody would have said. She wondered what Proudfoot would say.

“Well, Mr. Proudfoot,” Mrs. Buckworth said, and Tonks turned her attention back to her notepad, “it seems I sold a bottle of Feitiço Port Wine last week. I’m afraid I can’t tell you who to. I would
be a bad business woman if I went around publicizing my clients’ personal tastes.”

Tonks could not resist this time, and rolled her eyes dramatically.

“Mrs. Buckworth, information like this could help us return some very dangerous people to Azkaban.”

“Perhaps you should never have let them out.” Mrs. Buckworth began to close the book.

Tonks, deftly and swiftly, pulled her wand from her pocket and muttered a quick incantation. As the thick cover slammed closed, the page the book had been open to appeared in Tonks’s notes. It was a simple Copying Charm, but Tonks had rushed it. The ink on her notes was splotchy in some places and running in others. Or perhaps that was just how the woman’s book looked. Either way, this information they now had was better than nothing.

“Thank you for your time,” Proudfoot said. “The Ministry of Magic appreciates your help.” He reached into his robes and pulled out a card. “If you think of anything you can tell us without violating your clients’ privacy, please let us know.”

Mrs. Buckworth took the card and dropped it into her money box. “If that’s all, I have an order I need to finish adding to my inventory.”

“Oh, of course. We won’t bother you further.”

“Of course. We won’t bother you further.”

Proudfoot started for the door, but Tonks grabbed his arm before he touched the handle. Without a word, she nodded to the wizard across the street. She had hoped Proudfoot would laugh her suspicion off, tell her it was nothing. Instead, his face went grim.

“I saw him about five people in front of us in line at Mae Westwind’s,” he whispered. “Then he hovered at the window of Perkin’s Prime Cuts for a while as we talked to her. I’d hoped it was nothing.”

“You’d think if he was stalking us, he’d be less conspicuous. That white cloak with red lining certainly makes him stand out a bit.”

Proudfoot swore under his breath. “I know who it is. See those white gloves on his hands?”

Tonks’s stomach turned. “Lots of wizards wear gloves.” But she knew Proudfoot was right. She also had a feeling this was the Death Eater who had asked about Regulus Black ahead of them. She wondered if he’d somehow gotten to Brandy Buckworth first, and asked her to keep her mouth shut, too. Or maybe Brandy Buckworth was just an unhelpful person to everyone.

“We can’t confront him here, not where other people can get hurt. We can lure him somewhere emptier. We should leave one at a time,” Proudfoot suggested. “He can’t follow us both.”

But undercover work was Tonks’s specialty, not Proudfoot’s. “He probably saw us come in together,” she said. “It’d be suspicious if we left separately. He’ll know we’ve made him and bolt. Getting him somewhere less crowded is a good idea, though. This might turn out to be a nasty duel.”

They stepped out of the shop and into the morning sunlight. Despite it being the middle of May, the sunshine felt cold. Tonks hesitated only a moment on the step of the wine shop before heading west. She wasn’t entirely sure where to lead their quarry. Diagon Alley was too crowded by far,
and Knockturn Alley had too many hidey-holes, too many places to escape to. She didn’t want to lead him into Muggle London, either. She could only hope that on a workday morning the Bell Gardens would be empty.

Tonks led Proudfoot up past Gringotts to the small park at the end of Diagon Alley. They passed under the archway of bellflowers and Tonks headed for a bench near the entrance fountain. Her eyes skimmed the gardens and the acacia trees, searching for signs of danger or casualties. There was only one young couple standing beside the statue of the Star Crossed Lovers about thirty feet away. She hoped they would clear out if a duel started.

“Did he follow us?” Tonks asked.

“He hasn’t walked into the gardens yet. He might suspect we’re onto him.”

Tonks frowned and took Proudfoot’s hand in hers. She kept one hand in her wand pocket. “We’ll have to convince him we’re not.”

“Is he really going to buy this? Two Aurors, taking time off work for a lover’s stroll?”

“Have you got a better idea?” Tonks asked.

“We could just turn around and hex him now.”

“If we can get him into the gardens, we’ll be able to cast an Anti-Apparition Circle to the iron gates.”

“You’re right. Good use of terrain. Mad-Eye would be proud.”

Tonks flushed at the compliment. “He won’t come closer unless we go further in.” She tugged on Proudfoot’s hand with what she hoped looked like an eager, playful smile, and headed for the walkway to the east, decorated with crocuses. They weren’t in season just now, but a few of the purple flowers still marked the edge of the pathway.

Proudfoot leaned close and whispered in her ear, “He’s in.”

“We’ve got to get him far enough in so he can’t turn tail and run.” Despite the urgency in her voice, she did everything to look as if she was only returning sweet nothings.

Proudfoot certainly looked full of adoration. “You give the signal, and I’ll follow.”

Tonks walked along the bend of the pathway. She stopped and pointed to a bird nesting in one of the acacia trees. “Is he past the fountain?” she asked with a fond smile.

“Yes, only just.”

“We’ll have to take it.” Tonks thrust her wand into the air and shouted, “Antaparavi!”

A white ring expanded from beneath her feet and filled the garden. The ring of light had hardly touched the iron gates surrounding the park when Proudfoot pointed his wand at their stalker and shouted, “Stupefy!”

Tonks heard Mad-Eye’s critical voice in her head — “Disarm your opponent before you incapacitate! Jinxes are undoable, but wands are irreplaceable!”

It didn’t matter either way. The Death Eater was quick. He wordlessly created a shield as white as his cloak and Proudfoot’s spell bounced off into a nearby tree. As the shield faded, Tonks got a
brief but clear look at his face. It was definitely Pyrites, one of Voldemort’s most deadly followers. He had a wide smile on his face, like he was glad he’d been found out. He did not run for the exit. Instead, he stepped forward, and slashed his wand through the air.

It was a quick, simple motion, but Tonks was prepared.

“Protego!” she shouted, and raised a shield of her own.

The tail end of the slash passed her shield and cut Proudfoot across his arm. His sleeve tore open and blood trickled down his arm, but it was nothing serious.

Pyrites sighed, disappointed. “I do like when it splatters. Come now, Aurors, certainly you can put up a better fight than this.”

Tonks hurled a silent Disarming Jinx at him, but he effortlessly stepped aside and thrust his wand forward. A sharp pain struck her shoulder, like something had been forced clear through to the other side. Warm blood seeped into her robes, and her arm was suddenly dead weight. At least it wasn’t her wand arm.

Proudfoot threw a bolt of hot yellow light at Pyrites, and it collided with a deep violet flame in midair. Sparks erupted at the point of collision, and a sharp bolt lanced out to one of the acacia trees. It began to burn with a black and gold flame, wood cracking as the fire spread through the branches.

Tonks saw Pyrites wand twitch and shouted, “Protego Duo!” hoping her shield would be large enough to cover her and Proudfoot.

There was a crash as his curse shattered her shield, but she and Proudfoot remained unharmed. She thought bitterly how absurd it was that they were suddenly on the defensive when they were the ones who had started this duel.

“Expulso!” Proudfoot shouted.

The force of the spell sent a cloud of dirt in the air as it struck the earth, shielding Pyrites from their sight. Tonks, though, caught a shimmer of silver as the spell struck and was not hopeful.

She pointed her wand at the burning tree and with a quick set of charms, broke off a branch and hurled it at the dirt explosion. Tonks heard the grunt as her attack struck, but saw the movement in the dust cloud too late. She stumbled backwards and fell into the dirt as a spell cut across her chest.

“Tonks!”

“I’m fine,” she grunted. She struggled to stand, but her arms were unable to properly support her weight. Blood began to seep from the wound in her chest. They were losing, badly.

Proudfoot cast a Shield Charm to defend the two of them as Pyrites cleared the dust. Tonks took the brief reprieve to send her Patronus off for help.

As her silver rabbit scampered over the white pillars of Gringotts, Pyrites approached them.

“You set a trap for me and have sprung it on yourselves,” he said with a laugh. “I really only came looking for a stray cat, but, you know, I think Bella would be happy to meet her niece, don’t you?”

It was Tonks’ turn to put up a shield as Pyrites thrust another curse at them. Proudfoot waved his wand in a tight circle, and Pyrites legs snapped together. He fell to the ground with a soft thud.
Pyrites gasped for air, wind knocked out of him, but it didn’t stop him from waving his wand and throwing another curse at Proudfoot.

Tonks could not react quickly enough, and Proudfoot took the curse to the face. He, too crumpled to the ground. Tonks reached out to grab him, but a curse hit her hand. The aim was off, and she was left with a gash across the underside of her wrist. In the moment of pain, however, she dropped her wand.

Pyrites countered the curse binding his legs and stood. “I do prefer curses that leave marks, but I suppose I can see the convenience of Confundus Charms. Now that he’s out of the way, dear, tell me — where is Regulus Black?”

Tonks kept her eyes on Pyrites, but searched with her fingertips through the dirt for her wand. “I’m looking for him too, same as you.”

“I’m no fool, girl. I know you’re working with Dumbledore. He’s hiding Black, isn’t he?”

“Black went running back to You-Know-Who last year. We haven’t seen him since.”

“Interestingly enough, Podmore told us the same story. Then, after we loosened his tongue a little, he said the Black brothers were living under the same roof. Shall I loosen yours for you?”

Pyrites’ curse cut across her cheek and a few droplets of blood landed on Pyrites white gloves, mixing with a thin layer of dust.

Tonks, terrified as she was, did not let it show in her face. One of the perks of training her skills as a Metamorphmagus meant she had excellent control over her own expressions.

“You said you were gonna take me to Bellatrix, right? Ask her if Sirius and Regulus could live under the same roof. She’ll tell you the same thing my mum told me when I asked her if Sirius could be hiding Regulus: that’s like throwing oil on fire and wondering why it won’t go out. The Ministry doesn’t know where Black is, Dumbledore doesn’t know, and neither does Sirius. But if you find out — I’m all ears.”

“Well, then, I suppose if you have no idea where Black is, you’re of no use to the Dark Lord.”

Pyrites raised his wand. Tonks’ fingertips closed around her own wand. She threw herself over her partner and shouted the incantation for a Shield Charm. As soon as she heard the sharp crash of Pyrites’ curse rebounding, she shot a Disarming Jinx at him, followed immediately by a Full Body Bind Curse. She took another gash on her cheek, just under the one he’d delivered earlier, but she could feel that she’d gotten lucky. His swing had gone wide and she’d only just caught the tail end of it. Pyrites was done playing with them.

Tonks cast an explosion at his feet, hoping the force would drive him backwards, put some distance between them. It did throw up another dust cloud to obscure her vision, and she threw up a Shield Charm in case he decided to throw curses wildly in her direction.

A powerful gust of wind blew through the park, dispersing the dirt.

“Oh, look at that!”

Tonks turned in the direction of the wind and saw two familiar figures. Relief flooded through her entire body.

Fabian and Gideon Prewett stood at the entrance to garden. They were shoulder to shoulder — at
least as shoulder to shoulder as they could be, with Fabian a foot taller than his brother, and
missing most of his right shoulder.

Fabian grinned and raised his wand. “Pyrites, I’d recognize your ugly mug anywhere. I think you
owe me an arm.”

Tonks could see the color drain from Pyrites face. He threw a wild hex at the two of them, then
turned and ran. Gideon easily deflected the spell, and Fabian hurried after the Death Eater.

Pyrites, however, had enough of a lead. Though Tonks tried throwing her own spells to trip him,
her aim from the ground was weak. Pyrites reached the iron gate that marked the perimeter of the
garden, used a spell to help himself vault over it, and Disapparated before he’d even touched the
ground on the other side.

Gideon leaned down beside Tonks and Proudfoot. “What’d he hex you two with?”

“He said he put a Confundus Curse on Proudfoot. We have to get him to St. Mungo’s —” Tonks bit
down on her tongue. She wasn’t sure if “we” was appropriate. “Are you here on Scrimgeour’s
orders or Dumbledore’s?”

“We got your message at Headquarters,” Gideon said. “Scrimgeour thinks we’re fairly well south,
looking into a lead on Dolohov, who, incidentally, also owes my brother an arm.” Gideon’s face
was grim. “Can you get Proudfoot to St. Mungo’s on your own?”

“I should be able to Apparate us both. I might need help getting him outside my Anti-Apparition
circle.”

Gideon lifted Proudfoot over one shoulder as Fabian approached them and helped Tonks to her
feet.

“We’re lucky you came,” Tonks said. “I thought it’d be easy — two against one — but… it
wasn’t.”

“Pyrites is particularly deadly,” Fabian grunted. “He might be a one-trick pony, but he’s good at
his tricks.”

Fabian and Gideon walked Tonks outside the gardens.

“You’ll be alright getting out of here?” Fabian asked.

“Yes,” said Tonks. “I’ll tell them I managed to scare him off myself.”

“Good girl.” Gideon clapped her on the shoulder. “Stop by Headquarters before you go home
tonight.”

“Oh — they know,” she said in a rush, remembering what Pyrites had told her. “They know we
have Regulus Black. You-Know-Who is hunting him, that’s why Pyrites was following us —”

“We figured as much,” said Fabian.

“Dumbledore didn’t think Black’s ruse would do much good,” said Gideon, “but they had to try
something. I wouldn’t worry about it. Black’s safe at Headquarters. You need to get Proudfoot
help, and probably a Blood-Replenishing Potion for yourself.”

Tonks was beginning to feel woozy. It would be unwise to linger much longer.
“Yeah, okay.” She took Proudfoot from Gideon. He was heavy, and she struggled under his weight, but she knew she only needed to support him for a short Apparition trip. She could manage that.

Tonks closed her eyes, felt the pressure in her ears drop and her stomach turn as she Apparated into the waiting room in St. Mungo’s.

As soon as she felt the smooth tile beneath her feet, she shouted, “Help! I need a Healer! It’s urgent! Please, he’s hurt badly.”

Two wizards in lime-green robes were at her side almost immediately, asking her what had happened. As the Healers took Proudfoot from her and led both of them down the hall, she managed to babble out who they were and how they’d each been cursed. She was seated in a chair and someone was pressing a wand to her chest with a glowing blue light at its tip.

“You’ll be alright,” the Healer said in a reassuring voice, and she believed him.

She closed her eyes and tipped her head back against the wall. She felt her wounds sting as a Healer dripped dittany on them. Someone put a potion in her hand and told her to drink; she listened immediately.

The potion made her feel warm, and she felt energy return to her. She was still exhausted from their duel, but she didn’t feel like falling asleep where she sat.

She opened her eyes and checked her wounds. It was like she’d never been cursed — except for the tears in her robes. Her mother was going to have a heart attack.

The Healers were still looking over Proudfoot, and she was largely being ignored. She had no desire to interrupt their work. She went back to resting her head against the wall and turned over the day’s events. She wondered if there was a better way she could have handled the situation with Pyrites. She did not think so, other than she needed to become a better duelist. Perhaps she should ask Lily to show her some pointers.

Tonks remembered the sales log she had copied from Brandy Buckworth’s shop, and Appeared it into her hands. Here, in the bright light of the hospital, it was possible to read the tight script detailing the last month of sales. Brandy Buckworth had said she’d sold a bottle of Port Wine last week, which was true, but Tonks could see that Buckworth had sold a bottle of wine every week for at least the last month. The name listed on the sale was “Winky” and no last name. Tonks was certain it was a House-Elf, which was at least progress. She could submit a form to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and figure out where the house-elf Winky was registered. That would give them a good idea where Rookwood was hiding, and most likely the rest of the Death Eaters. Possibly even Voldemort himself.

Tonks Vanished the paper and leaned against the wall once more. She felt as though she’d barely closed her eyes when someone had their hand on her shoulder.

“Ma’am?”

Tonks opened her eyes and straightened, looking up at a witch with kind eyes and a comforting smile.

“You’re welcome to go home. You’re in excellent condition. If you feel any lingering exhaustion or coldness in your limbs, you may want another dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion.”

Tonks did not think her exhaustion was from blood loss. “Thanks. I should probably get back to
work. Uh, how is he? My partner?”

The witch’s kind smile disappeared. “We’re going to hold him overnight. He took quite a curse to
the head, never a good start. He’s a bit addled at the moment. Does he have family that need to be
notified?”

Tonks bit down on her lip. “He has a sister….” She wondered if his sister was allowed in St.
Mungo’s. “She lives with a Muggle, though.”

“Not to worry. We can take care of things like that.”

“Oh, okay.” Tonks took in a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I know you said you’re going back to work, but I advise you go home and rest.”

“Thanks.” But there was too much work to be done. Too much work for the Ministry and work for
the Order.

The woman patted her arm and left.

Tonks tried to get a look at Proudfoot, but a curtain had been drawn around his bed, and she could
see the shadows of two Healers working. She decided not to bother them wandered back into the
waiting room. She took a moment to collect her thoughts, then Apparated to the Atrium of the
Ministry of Magic.

She waved to security as she passed, flashing her Auror badge, and headed up the lift to the second
floor.

Anne Scrimgeour looked up briefly, a curt hello on her lips, but after seeing the state of Tonks’s
robes, she stood.

“Are you alright?” Anne asked.

Tonks waved her down. “Wotcher, Anne. I’m alright. Robes could use mending I suppose, but I
thought I ought to let Mum do it. I’m sure I’d muck it up somehow.”

“What happened?”

“Ah, you’ll read all about it in my report.”

“And Proudfoot?”

Tonks’s casual smile wavered. “St. Mungo’s. He’ll manage, I’m sure.”

Tonks had hardly reached her desk when Scrimgeour, who had been in conversation with Robards
at the pinboard, caught sight of her. It did not take him long to take in her face and robes and make
a quick decision about what to do next.

“Tonks, my office, immediately,” he said.

Tonks, feet heavy as a lead cauldron, followed the Head of the Auror Department into his office.

She was used to Rufus Scrimgeour portraying a picture of strength. He was tall, broad shouldered,
with wild hair and a fire in his eyes that betrayed how quick he was to duel. Now, however, he
looked kind and concerned. He looked like the sort of person she could believe was an uncle to a
young girl like Anne.
“Quick-Quotes?” he asked.

Tonks nodded.

Scrimgeour Summoned a roll of parchment and quill from his desk and animated the quill.

“Your report, then.”

Tonks, grateful that she would not have to write out the report after she’d finished talking, told Scrimgeour everything she could. She told him who they’d interviewed and what they’d learned about the wine that could give away the location of Rookwood. She told him how they’d discovered they were being followed, and her plan to lure Pyrites into the Bell Gardens. She told him the duel had been difficult, Proudfoot had been hurt, but she’d managed to intimidate Pyrites into running. She said she was sorry they didn’t catch him after all that work. She left out the part about Pyrites searching for Regulus Black. The Ministry still thought Black was working with Voldemort’s followers, and there was nothing she could do about that.

“Alright, then. Thank you for your report,” Scrimgeour said. The gentleness Tonks had seen in his eyes had lessened. He was her commanding officer once more. “I’ll have Robards send the memo to Magical Creatures and Kingsley will see to it Proudfoot is taken care of. You’re to go home and rest. I still expect you in the morning.”

Tonks thought about protesting, insisting on following up on the House-Elf lead herself, but remembered how much work she had to do for the Order, too.

“Yessir,” she said, unusually meek.

She stood and returned to the office. She waved off the questions from Robards and Williamson, not in the mood to retell the story. Alice and Frank looked concerned, but they let her have her space. She expected, though, they’d be at Headquarters as soon as they could be to find out what had happened.

Tonks said her goodbyes and headed downstairs to the Atrium. She felt in a bit of a daze, confused, like someone had changed the lights and everything was in a slightly different shade.

Tonks had grown up on stories of the war against Voldemort. She’d been eight the night the war ended, and to her and her peers, the war had been glorious. They weren’t old enough to understand the horrors of it all, only just old enough to experience the joy of victory.

She’d known when she’d signed up for the Order that it wouldn’t be pretty. She hadn’t been an Auror long, but she knew the dangers of the Dark Arts. She knew that fighting Voldemort would put herself at greater risk, but she did it anyway, because it was right.

But this year had been harder in more ways than she was prepared for. She’d been prepared to put her own life on the line, prepared to persist through her parents’ worry. She hadn’t been prepared for how much it would hurt to see the people she cared about face the danger she was so willing to face. She could never have prepared for watching Proudfoot crumple beneath a curse, nor knowing Sturgis Podmore had been Imperiused, nor Bode murdered because the Death Eaters so desperately wanted into the Department of Mysteries.

As Tonks Apparated out of the Ministry and walked up the steps of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, she thought about how Sirius had fought in the First Wizarding War. She’d often wondered why her parents had stayed out of the Order, why Andromeda Tonks had kept her distance even when it was clear that Sirius was no longer part of their old family. She thought now that perhaps
her mother hadn’t been able to face the thought of losing Sirius nor of losing the new family she’d made.

Tonks rang the bell and winced, remembering a moment too late she wasn’t supposed to ring. She heard the pounding of footsteps and a few screams as portraits were hastily shushed. The door opened and she was pulled inside quickly by Remus Lupin.

He looked almost as terrible as she felt. She didn’t blame him. The full moon had been a week ago, and though he’d returned to his regular schedule of Order duties a few days ago, it was obvious he wasn’t at his best yet.

“Sorry,” she said. “Forgot about the bell.”

He gave her a thin smile. “It was well-timed. I was just starting to search for a motivation to get up and make lunch. Would you like something?”

Proudfoot’s offer of an early lunch seemed so distant.

“I could eat,” she said.

As the two walked down the hall, he asked. “You’re alright then? Fabian and Gideon had only just stopped by when your Patronus came through.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Are they here?”

“No, they stopped by just to let me know that you were alright, then headed off.”

“Oh. Is anyone else here?”

“Just Regulus. Molly was here for breakfast, but left a couple hours ago. James and Lily are at the Ministry today.”

“And Sirius?”

“On an assignment with Mad-Eye.”

They said nothing else as they went down to the kitchen together, except Remus asked her if she’d be alright with soup, and she said soup sounded fine. Even in the kitchen, their only conversation was agreeing on which items to put in the soup — potatoes, carrots, celery, parsley, and a radish that Tonks transfigured into an onion. They sat down at the dinner table with glasses of water while the soup simmered on the stove, and Tonks tried very hard to think of something interesting to say.

She’d never truly been shy around Remus. From the moment Tonks had met Sirius when she was thirteen, she’d adored him, and it hadn’t taken her long to develop a crush on “Uncle-Sirius’s-Friend-Lupin” who was quiet, friendly, mysterious, and had always treated her like an adult, the way she had always wanted her mother to treat her.

Tonks, boisterous and outgoing, had always talked freely with Remus. It was only this last year, when he’d started walking her to the door as she left, when he’d started asking her to stay to dinner, that she had started to get nervous. It was like her childish crush had weight now. It’d been one thing to fancy Sirius’s friend, but it was another thing, now that she was a proper adult, to realize she loved him, and there was a chance — a slim one — that he might love her back. What she had to say to him mattered suddenly.

“Your robes,” Remus cleared his throat, “is that… some new young trend?”
Tonks looked down in the tears in her sleeves and across her chest. She half-laughed. “No. Bit of a duel gone south. Actually,” she waved her wand and Summoned a piece of parchment to her place at the table. While she wrote, she told Remus about her duel with Pyrites.

As she wrote, she tried not to watch him too closely, but it was hard to keep from analyzing each expression. His face grew grim when she told him about the duel. He asked if she was alright, and she assured him she was perfectly fine.

“I’m sure you could wear one of Lily’s robes, if you’d like. She’s about your size, I imagine.”

“I’m about anyone’s size,” Tonks laughed, “if I want to be.”

Remus smiled at her joke, and it was such a fond smile, Tonks felt her cheeks grow warm. She hastily rolled up the parchment.

“I’m sure the Ministry will keep the Prophet from reporting on it,” she said. “That’s what they did with Savage’s run-in with Dolohov. They’re so eager to keep face with the public they won’t even let the public know what sort of danger they’re in.”

“It is unfortunate,” Remus agreed. He stood and checked on the soup. “Doesn’t help our cause any at all.”

“I can’t believe the Ministry would be keeping things quiet just to keep people from listening to Dumbledore.”

“If Fudge is worried about Dumbledore stealing his job, I think Fudge would do anything to stop Dumbledore.” Remus used his wand to ladle the soup into two bowls.

“That’s so petty.”

“I’m sure he’s worried about keeping peace, too. No one who remembers the war is eager for it again.”

Tonks took the bowl Remus handed to her. “You have more grace for others than anyone I’ve ever met. I work with Fudge and I can’t be nearly so sympathetic.”

He smiled and shook his head. “I wouldn’t call it sympathy, I just… I remember how terrible the war is. I’m sure he remembers too.”

“Sorry, is there a definition of sympathy I’m unfamiliar with? Because that certainly sounds like what you just said.”

Remus laughed now, and Tonks felt warmth flow through her, like she’d just taken another dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion. She’d always enjoyed making jokes, making others laugh, but there was something particularly special about making Remus laugh.

“Maybe you’re right,” Remus said, “but don’t for a minute think I’m excusing what he’s doing. He’s fully in the wrong. And I’m not sure I’d forgive him if he were to ever apologize. Between denouncing Dumbledore, denying Voldemort’s return, and hiring Umbridge —” Remus stopped abruptly, and Tonks wasn’t sure if it was because he’d run out of things to be angry about or if he was just too frustrated to continue.

“Well, I’d drink to that,” Tonks said. She tapped her glass and then his, turning the water into brandy. But as soon as she lifted the glass, he reached out and took it from her.
“Oh no. You just had a significant amount of blood loss. You’re not drinking alcohol for another twenty-four hours.”

“Come on, you’re not my Healer or anything. I feel fine.”

Remus tapped her glass and returned it to water. “I’ve enough experience with mixing alcohol and Blood-Replenishing Potion to know it’s a bad idea.”

“Bad ideas are the best ideas.”

He laughed again. “You sound worse than Sirius.”

“I am worse than Sirius.” But she drank the water he’d given her without further protest.

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“How many times did Sirius run away to join the circus?”

Remus grinned. “Okay, how many wizarding laws did you break while you were in school?”

Tonks put a hand to her chest in false offense. “I, sir, am a member of the Aurors of the Ministry of Magic, an elite class of duelists dedicated against the Dark Arts. I would never, never break a law and profane the Ministry of Magic — at least, I certainly wouldn’t tell anyone if I did.”

He laughed, hard enough that he leaned back in his chair. He took almost a minute to compose himself. “Fair enough. But know that if you ever were to tell me, I’m an excellent secret keeper.”

Tonks opened her mouth to extend the teasing a little longer, to draw him in a bit more before telling him to story of the time she impersonated a member of the Wizengamot, but Remus stood, and she realized lunch was over. She hadn’t expected it to be so short. She wondered if she’d said something that put him off.

Remus took her empty bowl and his and put them in the sink. “I hate to be a poor host, but I’m in need of a nap. Feel free to stay, of course. Regulus is wandering around somewhere. James and Lily should be back in an hour or two. There’s a crossword in the parlor I’m stuck on, if you feel inspired.”

Tonks had never been one for crosswords, but she smiled and said, “Thanks, I’ll do that.”

Remus hesitated in the doorway, like he was looking for something more to say. Whatever it was, he didn’t find it, and he headed upstairs.

As his footsteps faded away, Tonks put her head down on the table and groaned. Talking to Remus was easy enough; it was comfortable just sitting and chatting. But the before and after of it was unusually stressful.

She managed to get up and wandered into the parlor. She saw the crossword puzzle draped over the arm of the chaise lounge and glanced at it, but it was as if the boxes and numbers and letters induced an immediate headache. Tonks had spent a long time doing reports today, and she had little interest in things that looked like more work.

She sank onto the couch and closed her eyes. She didn’t realize until she had this moment of quiet that the day’s events had truly drained her. She wasn’t quite sure what time it was — maybe early afternoon — but she decided she, too, was ready for a nap.
Tonks was used to naps in odd places. She’d fall asleep in class, in the library, on the back porch — once she’d even fallen asleep on her broom during a Quidditch match. Her naps often turned out to be fortuitous. If she’d never fallen asleep in the library while studying for her N.E.W.T.s, she never would have overheard Dumbledore and Mad-Eye discussing the possibility of taking on a new Auror. If she’d never fallen asleep on her broom, she would have never fallen directly onto Quimby, giving the Hufflepuff Seeker the edge he needed to win the match. If she’d never fallen asleep on her back porch, she would have never caught her mother trying to let out the small rabbit she’d adopted the day before.

She wasn’t sure how long she napped for, but the room was tinted with the orange light of sunset when she finally managed to open her eyes again. She heard talking in the hallway, and recognized James and Lily’s hushed tones.

“I can’t imagine what Hagrid’s thinking,” Lily whispered. She sounded frustrated, the way she had when she’d shared with Tonks the story of James and Sirius trying to keep a hippogriff as a pet. “And to put Harry and Hermione in that sort of danger —”

“It’s Hagrid.” James sounded more amused, like the sort of person who thought taming a wild hippogriff was a good idea. “I’m not surprised, and I wouldn’t worry. Harry and Hermione are sensible. They’ll figure it out. Besides, the school year is almost over. If Umbridge was going to make her move against Hagrid, surely she would have done so by now. She’s probably waiting for a time it’ll be more subtle. No need to repeat the dramatics of Dumbledore leaving.”

Lily let out a long, soft sigh. “Speaking of, have you spoken with him?”

“Haven’t heard a word. You?”

There was a pause, then Lily said, “I’m worried about Harry there, of course, but — Severus could be in real danger now. What Harry’s done…. This threatens everything.”

“Snape’s smart,” James said. “He’ll work his way out of it. He’ll find the right lies to tell You-Know-Who to keep his face as a double-agent. It might be difficult if he still loves you, but he’ll manage. He always does somehow.”

Lily snorted. “Snape doesn’t love me.”

“Lils, you’re brilliant, fiery, and kind and loving. You’re also very smart, so I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this. Why wouldn’t Snape love you?”

“We haven’t even been friends in almost twenty years!”

“I loved you, even when you hated me.”

“Hah. Even when you kissed Janie at the Christmas Party? Or took Bettie to Hogsmeade for Valentine’s?”

“Yeah, even then.”

Tonks wished she had a pillow to pull over her ears. Not that James and Lily were keeping her awake, nor that this was a private conversation she probably shouldn’t be listening to, but hearing the way they casually talked about how much they loved each other made her stomach turn. She wondered what it would take for her to be that brave with her feelings for Remus. She tried to remind herself that she was an adult, and he was an adult, and surely she could just talk to him about it, but she felt like such a child.
“Oh — Remus, feeling better?” James said. “We didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t.” Remus’s voice was quiet, distant. Tonks heart still raced as if he were standing right beside her. “I didn’t realize how long I slept.”

“You’ve been working yourself too hard,” Lily said. “You’re not going to make things any better by forcing yourself past your limits.”

“I’ll be alright. Is Nymphadora still here?”

“She’s asleep, too,” said James. “I heard she had a long day.”

“Voldemort’s followers are getting bolder.” Remus sighed. “It makes me think he’s got something planned.”

“We’ve got him cornered,” Lily said. “He can’t get to the prophecy unless he goes to the Ministry himself.”

“Or gets Harry to go for him,” James grumbled.

“Harry’s promised he won’t leave Hogwarts.” But even Lily sounded like she didn’t believe her own words.

“Harry’s as curious as he is brave. Now that he knows there’s a prophecy, there’s no telling what he’ll do, what danger he might actually put himself in.”

“What are our options? Pull him out right before his O.W.L.s? He’s got a little more than a month left at Hogwarts. He’s promised to stay out of Umbridge’s way. He needs to be there to learn Occlumency.”

“Has Snape started teaching him again?” asked Remus.

“Dumbledore said he’d talk to him,” answered James. “So, we can only hope.”

“Let’s get out of the hallway,” said Lily. “Maybe get some dinner together for when Sirius and Mad-Eye get back.”

“Remus,” said James, “why don’t you check on Tonks? See if she’s interested in staying for dinner.”

Tonks couldn’t make out the mumbled exchange that followed. She waited, listening to Remus’s soft footsteps muffled by the rug, waited for for his hand on her shoulder, listening to his gentle whisper. “Tonks? Are you awake? It’s nearly dinner time.”

Tonks yawned and stretched. “Dinner already? Eat, nap, eat, sounds like a good schedule.”

She looked up at him, trying to figure out what he was thinking. He looked tired, a bit worn, but there was a glow in his cheeks. She wondered if that was from a good nap. She wondered if it was something she’d done.

“James and Lily are back. They’re downstairs getting something together. Would you like to stay for dinner?”

Tonks tried to pretend her ears weren’t burning. “Dinner sounds great.”

She followed Remus downstairs to the kitchen. James and Lily greeted her warmly and the four of
them set in on dinner preparations. Lily was an excellent delegator of tasks. She set James on preparing the chicken, Remus on chopping vegetables, and Tonks on setting the table. Tonks was grateful to be given something simple to do, and she enjoyed the casual conversation between the four of them. James and Lily didn’t ask about her robes, nor about her duel with Pyrites. She thought they were avoiding the subject of the war all together, and after what she’d overheard in the hallway, she didn’t blame them. It was nice to pretend for just a few moments they were four friends enjoying a pleasant evening together. Tonks could almost pretend it was a double date.

Regulus joined them almost as soon as dinner was ready. He didn’t seem surprised to see Tonks, though he did give her robes curious look-over. She got him an extra place setting and the five of them sat down to eat. It was a pleasant affair overall, though quieter than past Order dinners had been.

They were just finishing up when a silver labrador burst into the room. “Here and didn’t want to knock,” Amos Diggory’s voice said from the dog’s mouth, then the dog disappeared.

“I’ll let him in,” said James.

James went upstairs while Lily began to clear the finished place settings. She got the leftovers together and put them onto a sixth setting, ready and waiting for Amos Diggory when he came down to the kitchen with James.

“Oh — thank you,” Amos said, when Lily offered him food. “Fiona will have something waiting at home. I can’t stay long, only came to see if Nymphadora was still around.”

Tonks glanced around the table bemusedly. “Nymphadora who?”

“Alright, Tonks.”

“Yes?”

“Robards sent me that form requesting information on the house-elf.”

Tonks was surprised. “I didn’t expect that to get processed for another day or two. I know those records are old and fairly well enchanted.”

“I didn’t need to look at the records for this one. Winky’s the house-elf that used to belong to the Crouch family. I personally helped her find a new placement, at Ced’s request, after the fiasco with the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Oh, well that’s brilliant.” It was a stroke of luck they sorely needed in this battle. “Where is she?”

“She’s with Malfoy Manor now.”

Tonks’s heart sank into her stomach. “Are you sure?”

Amos nodded.

Remus let out a soft sigh. “So Voldemort is likely with the Malfoys.”


“I’ll process the request for the information,” Amos said. “If we do everything by the book, keep everything above board, there’s a chance the Auror Department will be able to follow through on the lead.”
“I certainly hope so,” Tonks sighed. “Proudfoot and I went through a lot to get that information back to the Ministry.”

“You’re sure you won’t stay and eat?” Lily asked.

Amos shook his head. “I shouldn’t keep Fiona waiting. She’ll be getting worried as it is.” He started for the door, but paused and turned. “Ah — have you spoken with Harry? He hasn’t… said anything about Cedric has he?”

James shook his head. “No. We can ask, if you’d like.”

“No, I’m sure it’s alright, thanks. No news is good news and all.”

Once Amos had gone, Tonks reluctantly stood.

“I’m sure my mum is starting to worry, too. Thank you for a lovely dinner.”

“Of course,” Lily said. “You’re always welcome.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Remus offered, and Tonks couldn’t have been more grateful.

Remus took her to the door and she lingered on the porch for a moment. She wanted to say something, anything to extend the evening just a little bit longer.

“The stars are nice tonight,” Remus said. “You can’t usually see them this well in London.”

“It rained a lot the other day,” Tonks said. “I think that helps a bit.” She pointed to the constellation just above the house across the street. “You can see Sirius from here.”

“Brightest in the sky as usual,” Remus said with a small smile.

“No constellation for ‘Nymphadora,’” Tonks said. “Mum wanted to cut that tradition of naming kids after stars, but I don’t know why Mum decided to name me something just as ridiculous.”

“I think Nymphadora’s a lovely name.”

Tonks hoped it was too dark for him to see her blush.

“Sirius would abandon his name if he could, you know,” Remus said quietly, “but there are some things that are just a part of us, no matter how much we might wish they weren’t.”

Tonks had a feeling Remus was talking about his own name and what it meant. “It’s not that I’ve really changed my name, I just… use a slightly different one.”

“What would you do if you got married?”

Tonks didn’t want to look at his face and see if there was any seriousness in his eyes. She wanted to just imagine it was all jovial. “Hyphenate,” she said simply. “Seems easiest.” She risked a glance at Remus, but his eyes were still on the stars above them. She remembered her thoughts about James and Lily’s love and wondered if now was the right time to be honest about her feelings. It was the middle of the war, and who knew if either of them would live to see the other side of it. Was there a better time?

“Nymphadora Tonks-Proudfoot?”

There was a teasing smile on Remus’s lips, but a seriousness in Remus’s eyes that made Tonks feel
“Proudfoot’s just a friend,” she said quickly. “A good friend, but a friend nonetheless.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so,” she said hotly. She folded her arms over her chest. She certainly hadn’t wanted the conversation to go this way, and she certainly didn’t want to leave this way.

After another moment’s pause, Remus said, “What if you just went by Dora? Doesn’t have the same weight of your full name, but then you wouldn’t be tied to your last name.”

Tonks liked being Tonks, but when Remus said, ‘Dora’ she thought her insides would melt. She said the most impulsive sentence she’d said in her entire life — and Tonks had said a lot of impulsive things. This one, though, took the cake over every other stupid thing she’d said.

“I’d be happy as Dora Lupin.”

She watched his face flicker with a smile, but it faded into seriousness quickly. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Tonks took her moment of bravery and ran with it. “Why not? I like you — a lot. I have for a long time. Shouldn’t we finally try it?”

“I know you think it’s a good idea, but — it’s not a good idea. I’m not a good idea.”

“Bad ideas are the best ideas.”

Remus laughed, but it was a sad laugh, full of so much weight, weight Tonks was only vaguely familiar with. “You really are worse than Sirius. You should get home. Andromeda must be worried.”

“Why can’t we at least talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

Tonks felt as if she’d been cut through with another of Pyrites spells. Her limbs seemed to go numb. She struggled not to cry.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Tonks searched for the strength to at least give Remus a polite “Good night,” but she had no words left. Or she had too many. It felt like everything was caught in her throat and so nothing could come out. She walked down the steps of the porch of Number 12 Grimmauld Place and into the street. She didn’t even notice bumping shoulders with Sirius as she crossed the Apparition line.

“Tonks,” Sirius said with a grin. “Love the new look of your robes.” Then his smile faded when he got a good look at her. “What’s wrong?”

As much as Tonks adored her cousin, he was the last person she could talk to Remus about. And, to cap it off, Mad-Eye Moody was just a foot away. He’d been her mentor for three years. She wasn’t about to lose her head in front of him now.

“I’m fine,” she managed, hoping no one else heard her voice crack. “Just heading home.”
Sirius did not look like he believed her, but he looked up the porch steps and saw Remus halfway in the doorway. He did not seem to have any more questions for her. He went up the stairs with a clouded expression on his feet and the weight of a child’s tantrum in his feet.

“Eyes front, Tonks,” Mad-Eye said, clapping a hand on her shoulder.

Tonks sniffed and nodded. She Apparated home with a pop and stepped from Grimmauld Place into her mother’s garden. She made it in through the back door into the kitchen and saw her dad seated at the kitchen table. Her mum was standing at the sink, cleaning a mixing bowl with her wand.

Ted Tonks smiled at her. “Welcome home. Your mum made chocolate cake. It’s nearly done”

Andromeda Tonks was less welcoming. “Where have you been? It’s late — no word — we’ve been worried sick — what happened to your robes —” But she stopped when she saw the tears in Tonks’s eyes. Her voice turned soft. “Sit down, Nymphadora, tell us what happened.”

Tonks couldn’t even make it to the seat at the table. She collapsed into her mother’s arms instead and started crying. Mrs. Tonks held her close and stroked her hair.

“I’m so stupid,” she mumbled into her mother’s shoulder. “So stupid.”

Andromeda kissed her daughter’s cheek. “You’re not stupid, darling. You’re impetuous and brave, but you aren’t stupid.”

It was the sort of thing her mother always said. Words that could be encouraging, but never really helped. Still, Tonks appreciated that her mother was at least here, and she was grateful for her father too, who got up and joined the hug.

At least, no matter where Tonks ran, her parents were always here to catch her.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!!
O.W.L.s

Chapter Summary

Ron Weasley and company have exams to take.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope you've had a lovely summer! I'm so happy to be writing again. Looking forward to really digging back into this AU next year, and hoping we'll see the end of this book before the holidays if we're all lucky!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gryffindor’s victory was celebrated recklessly by the students. The Quidditch Cup had seemed so elusive all year, with half the team banned by Umbridge and half of the replacements struggling to find right end of their broom. In the clutch, though, Ron Weasley had finally pulled ahead.

It was everything Ron had dreamed of. He had been lifted onto the shoulders of his teammates; he’d been celebrated by everyone in Gryffindor. That Saturday night, students crowded around him in the common room, eagerly listening to him recount his victory. They’d all seen it, but they all wanted to relive that moment of victory.

Then Sunday morning arrived, and for a moment, Ron wondered if Saturday had been a dream, and perhaps he actually had the match against Ravenclaw today.

But as he passed Seamus on the way to the bathroom, he was greeted with a warm clap on the shoulder, and Ron swelled with pride. He’d actually done it. He’d actually won the Quidditch Cup. Not Fred, not George, not Charlie, not Harry — he’d done it. It was his prize.

Harry woke while Ron was brushing his teeth, eyes bleary and face pulled into a frown. Ron thought about asking if Harry had been having more bad dreams, but it seemed like the answer was always going to be “yes.” He wasn’t sure it was helpful to keep bringing them up. And, at any rate, last time they’d talked about Occlumency, Harry had said he was done with his lessons. Ron didn’t believe him, but Ron also didn’t believe Snape teaching Harry Occlumency was doing any good, so he kept his mouth shut about that, too.

Ron spat his toothpaste in the sink and said, “Morning, Harry.”

Harry mumbled back with a smile. It was a thin, strained smile, but Harry’s smiles were always strained these days, and Ron didn’t blame him. Between the war, Umbridge, O.W.L.s, and Cho, Harry had a lot on his plate. Even Ron was stressed over three out of those four things, and perhaps his smile would have also been strained, if his stress wasn’t pushed aside by a rousing chorus of “Weasley is our King,” when he entered the common room.

The Quidditch Cup was still on the mantle of the fireplace, where everyone could enjoy it until it would be moved to McGonagall’s office on Monday morning.
Ron sat down in an armchair nearby, where he had a good view of the trophy. It was his. Well and truly his.

Ginny slumped into a chair across from him, legs dangling over the armrest. She followed his line of sight to the trophy. Though she was the one who had snatched the Snitch from beneath Cho, she hadn’t received nearly the same praise as Ron had, and she seemed to be okay with that.

“Looks good there,” she said.

“Sure does.”

Harry came down a moment later and sank into the chair beside Ron. “Wasn’t sure I’d see that in here ever again.”

Ron’s cheeks flushed, a little with pride, a little with frustration. “We got lucky,” he mumbled.

“No, you played a great game,” Ginny said. “And when Harry’s back to playing Seeker, we’ll be unstoppable.”

“I’ve got a lifelong ban, Ginny,” sighed Harry.

“You’re banned as long as Umbridge is in the school. There’s a difference. Anyway, I think I’ll go for Chaser once you’re back. Angelina and Alicia are both leaving next year, and I prefer goal-scoring to Seeking anyway.”

Ron considered being on a team with Harry again. He wondered if he would have to share the spotlight. He liked playing with Harry, and he certainly hoped Harry’s lifelong ban from Quidditch would end with Umbridge, but he had to admit, he was enjoying this brief moment of being the most important person in Gryffindor. He remembered the vision he had had in their first year, where he’d seen his reflection in a mirror, winning the Quidditch Cup, being Quidditch Captain shaking hands with Dumbledore, and wearing a Head Boy badge. Ron glanced down at his prefect badge and wondered if that vision really might be coming true. And, as Ginny had said, Angelina was leaving next year....

Hermione came up behind the couch and interrupted Ron’s daydreaming. “Ready for breakfast?”

Though Hermione was often serious, she seemed unusually grim today, which upset Ron, who wondered why she couldn’t appreciate his victory as much as everyone else did.

“We should hurry up and eat, then get a head start on studying together,” she said, as they trooped down to breakfast.

“Do we have to?” Ron stood, shoulder slumped at the mention of studying.

“Unfortunately,” said Harry.

Hermione pushed open the portrait hole for everyone. “We should study outside today.”

“There’s nothing wrong with inside,” Ron protested.

When the four of them reached the Great Hall, the table of Gryffindors broke into another chorus of “Weasley is Our King!” and drowned out all conversation.

The Ravenclaws looked exasperated, clearly done in by their defeat, but they didn’t look as devastated as the Slytherins. Malfoy glared daggers at the Gryffindor table, furious that his song
had been co-opted. Ron grinned back, and even waved, bolstered by the support of his classmates.

Being the center of attention was better than anything Ron had dreamed of. He tried to be modest about it — he wanted to be modest about it — but it was hard not to grin when Jordan clapped his shoulder and said, “Great job, Ron,” or when Alicia knocked her fist against his as she passed by. He was important for once.

After Colin and Dennis Creevey led the hall in another chant, Ron, Harry, and Hermione made their exit. When they got to the stairs, Hermione again suggested they study outside.

“Do we have to?” Ron asked.

“It is nice out,” said Harry. “Quieter, certainly.”

Ron wasn’t too keen on the idea of leaving this place, where the praise felt endless, but when the common room erupted into a cheer just because he walked in, he agreed that maybe studying outside would be more practical.

Ron looked at the Quidditch Cup one more time as they headed out. “You know, I really didn’t think we’d win.”

“It was a surprise, certainly,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, it was like, nerves just had such a big hold of me. Malfoy’s bloody chant didn’t help. I’d let in so many goals in the games before, y’know?”

As they made their way down to the courtyard and settled under the shade of the beech tree, Ron realized he’d told the story before, probably a dozen times, but he still felt compelled to keep talking. The victory felt so good — what else could be more important than this?

“And, I mean, I’d already let in that one of Davies’s, so I wasn’t feeling that confident, but I dunno, when Bradley came toward me, just out of nowhere, I thought — you can do this! And I had about a second to decide which way to fly, you know, because he looked like he was aiming for the right goal hoop — my right, obviously, his left — but I had a funny feeling that he was feinting, and so I took the chance and flew left — his right, I mean, — and — well — you saw what happened.” He ran his hand through his hair and checked to see if anyone else were listening, particularly the group of girls in Hufflepuff robes not far off, “And then Chambers came at me about five minutes later —” Harry’s intense expression suddenly jolted Ron’s train of thought. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Harry said, and absentmindedly turned a page in his book. “You played a really good game.”

“Yeah… I really did.” Ron wondered if he was being insensitive to Harry’s feelings about not being able to play Quidditch and decided to stop talking about himself as much. “We actually won,” he said, more to himself than to his friends. Then in an attempt to bring the conversation back, said, “Did you see the look on Chang’s face when Ginny got the Snitch right out from under her nose?”

Hermione cleared her throat meaningfully and Ron suddenly felt bad about bringing up Cho. Maybe he should just stop talking about anything Quidditch related.

“I suppose she cried, did she?” said Harry, acid in his tone as he turned another page of his book, though he certainly hadn’t had time to read the full page.

“More out of temper than anything, though.” Ron frowned. Maybe Harry had been avoiding
everything Cho-related, but certainly Harry would have seen her cry at the game. “You saw her chuck her broom away when she got back to the ground, didn’t you?”

“Actually… no, Ron.” Hermione sighed and closed her book. “As a matter of fact, the only bit of the match Harry and I saw was Davies’s first goal.”

Ron frowned. “You didn’t watch?” He looked to Harry, hoping Harry might contradict Hermione, but Harry’s face was focused on the book in front of him. “You didn’t see me make any of those saves?”

His greatest achievement, and his best friends hadn’t been there to celebrate it. And they’d let him go off for almost twenty-four hours about it without saying a word. Ron felt his face grow hot. He wasn’t sure if he was more upset that they hadn’t been there or that they waited so long to bring it up.

Hermione put a comforting hand on his arm. “No, but — Ron, we didn’t want to leave, we had to!”

“It was Hagrid.” Harry finally closed his book. “He decided to tell us why he’s been covered in injuries ever since he got back from the giants. He wanted us to go into the forest with him, we had no choice, you know how he gets…. Anyway, he asked us to go down with him, said it was better if we went during the game, so no one would notice we’d be missing. He was really nervous, kept saying he’s probably not far from getting sacked. He led me and Hermione down into the Forbidden Forest and introduced us to Grawp, his half-brother.”

“His… what?”

“Same mother, a giantess. Hagrid decided to bring him back and take care of him. Thinks he can teach him English and says he wants company. Hagrid wants us to take care of him if Umbridge comes for him. And of course the centaurs were real unhappy about it. That and they’re angry with Firenze for teaching for Hogwarts. They weren’t too keen on letting us go, like they’ve declared war on anyone having anything to do with Hogwarts.”

“But,” Ron spluttered, still hung up on the details about Hagrid, “he brought one back? He brought back a giant and hid it in the forest?”

“Yep.”

Ron couldn’t believe it. “No. No, he can’t have.” Hagrid had done a lot of dangerous things, but this one seemed to stand out over all the others. “And Hagrid wants us to…?”

“Teach him English, yeah.”

“He’s lost his mind.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, turning the page of her Transfiguration textbook. “I’m starting to think he has. But unfortunately, he made Harry and me promise.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to break your promise, that’s all. I mean, come on… We’ve got exams and were about this far,” he pinched his fingers very nearly together, “from being chucked out as it is. And anyway, remember Norbert? Remember Aragog? Have we ever come off better for mixing with Hagrid’s monster mates?”

“I know,” said Hermione quietly, “it’s just that — we promised.”

Ron turned to Harry and dropped his voice. “Did you tell your parents? The Order could pick it up
“and something.”

Harry snorted. “And keep Grawp at Grimmauld Place? As much as Sirius would love that….”

“Did you ask your parents about Occlumency lessons?” Hermione asked.

Ron wondered if Hermione was changing the subject to avoid talking about the Order in public or if she was done talking about Grawp.

“I did. They said I can take more Occlumency lessons or I can leave Hogwarts. I said I’d rather leave.”

“Exams are just a month away,” said Hermione, “and you haven’t had any run-ins with Umbridge since she became Headmistress.”

“Except the time she tried to poison me.”

“You don’t know that’s what she was trying to do.”

“Are you defending her?”

“Of course not! I’m just trying to help you keep perspective.”

Though it was not often that Harry and Hermione were the ones snapping at each other, Ron could see the stress of the year was getting to the two of them. Like he’d predicted, talking about Occlumency never did Harry any good.

“You know,” said Ron, “Hagrid hasn’t been sacked yet. He’s managed this long, maybe he’ll hang on till the end of term and we won’t have to go near Grawp at all.”

“We can only hope,” said Hermione.

Harry looked down at his textbook for a moment, then tossed it aside. He laid down, laced his fingers behind his head, and looked up at the tree branches, swaying gently above them. “Ron, why don’t you finish telling us about the game, since we didn’t get to watch.”

Ron was more than happy to oblige.

—— —— ——

The weather steadily grew warmer, and as miserable as the Quidditch season had been overall, Ron found himself wishing desperately for another excuse to go out onto the Quidditch pitch. But Angelina and Alicia were nose-deep in studying for N.E.W.T.s, and Ron had his own O.W.L.s coming up to be concerned with.

Their teachers assigned them review work in gross amounts. Every class seemed equally miserable these days, except Defense, which was miserable on another level. It was a bad sign, though, that Ron dreaded Herbology as much as he dreaded Potions.

The rest of the fifth years weren’t helping Ron’s stress level, either. Hermione had little interest in any conversation that wasn’t related to homework, and Ernie Macmillan had begun asking after everyone else’s study habits.

“How many hours do you think you’re doing a day?” Ernie asked Ron and Harry, just before Herbology.
Ron hardly thought study hours were worth counting up per week, much less per day. “I dunno. A few?”

“More or less than eight?”

Ron quickly tried to count how many hours he slept a night, how many hours were devoted to school work and meal times, and wondered how anyone could average eight hours or more each day. “Less, I s’pose.”

“I’m doing eight. Eight or nine. I’m getting an hour in before breakfast every day. Eight’s my average. I can do ten on a good weekend day. I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on Tuesday — only seven and a quarter. Then on Wednesday —”

Sprout arrived just then and unlocked the greenhouse, thankfully cutting short Ernie’s panic-inducing monologue.

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry and saw his own fear reflected back at him. He wondered if they should try to study more hours, but he had a feeling his head would burst if he tried to cram much more into it.

Later that day, just after Potions, Malfoy said, “Of course, it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Malfoy cast a glance at the Gryffindor half of the classroom as he packed up his Potions supplies. “Now, Father’s been friendly with the head of Wizarding Examinations Authority for years — old Griselda Marchbanks. We’ve had her round for dinner and everything.”

“Do you think that’s true?” Hermione whispered to Ron and Harry, eyes wide.

Ron lazily swept his Potions vials into his bag. “Nothing we can do about it if it is.”

“I don’t think it’s true,” said Neville, shouldering his bag. “Because Griselda Marchbanks is a friend of my gran’s, and she’s never mentioned the Malfoys.”

“What’s she like, Neville?” asked Hermione. Her face was the very picture of desperation. “Is she strict?”

Neville thought for a moment. Then he looked down at his shoes. “Bit like Gran, really.”

“Knowing her won’t hurt your chances though, will it?” Ron nudged Neville’s shoulder encouragingly.

“Oh, I don’t think it will make any difference. She knows Mum and Dad too, and I’m nowhere near as good as them.”

“I’m not as good as my parents either,” Harry said. “If we’re being judged by that standard, we’ll all fail.”

“Surely we won’t be judged by adult wizarding standards.” Hermione looked ill as she said it though, and fished a book out of her bag, flipping through some of the pages. She didn’t look up from it until they had finished lunch and sat down in Transfiguration.

McGonagall gestured to the blackboard as the bell rang to begin class. “As you can see,” she said, as each student scrambled for a loose sheet of parchment, “your O.W.L.s are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit the theory exams in the morning and the practice in the afternoons. Your practical Astronomy examination will, of course, take place at night.
“Now, I must warn you that the most stringent Anti-Cheating Charms have been applied to your examination papers. Auto-Answer Quills are banned from the examination hall, as are Remembralls, Detachable Cribbing Cuffs, and Self-Correcting Ink. Every year, I am afraid to say, seems to harbor at least one student who thinks that he or she can get around the Wizarding Examinations Authority’s rules.” McGonagall’s eyes scanned over each and every student. Ron couldn’t be sure, but he felt like they lingered on him, and he quickly looked away and wrote down the date for their Divination O.W.L.

“I can only hope it is no one in Gryffindor,” she said, breaking eye contact with Sally Roper. “Our new —” McGonagall paused again, and adopted a more pinched expression than usual, “— headmistress —” she swallowed as if banishing an unpleasant flavor from her tongue, “— has asked the Heads of House to tell their students that cheating will be punished most severely — because, of course, your examination results will reflect upon the headmistress’s new regime at the school.” She let out a small breath of air, like she had just finished climbing a particularly long staircase. “However, that is no reason not to do your very best. You have your own futures to think about.”

“Please, Professor,” Hermione said, hand in the air, but too anxious to wait to be called on, “when will we find out our results?”

“An owl will be sent to you some time in July.”

“Excellent,” Ron heard Dean whisper to Seamus, just behind him, “so we don’t have to worry about it till the holidays.”

Ron hoped it was late in July. He would like to get a lot of Quidditch practice in before his mother forced him to study the rest of the summer to make up his inevitably dismal O.W.L. results.

Their first exam on Monday would be Charms. Ron was unsure exactly how to study. Hermione had quickly shut down all the trade in study-enhancing drugs, so Ron felt very inadequate as he looked over his Charms notes. It didn’t help that Hermione was asking Harry to quiz her, but taking the book away and double-checking her answers.

Dean and Seamus recited definitions of Charms back and forth to each other while Parvati and Lavender practicing their Locomotion Charms on their pencils. Neville, Sally-Anne, and Sophie were comparing notes and trading memory tricks. As helpful as Sophie’s rhythmic rhymes were, Ron found he couldn’t focus on his own notes, and stuck his fingers in his ears to focus better. He moved his lips as he read, hoping that might commit his notes to memory more permanently.

The table was quiet at dinner, each student exhausted from a long day of studying. Ron ate a lot to make up for his depleted energy, but Hermione hardly seemed able to get through a bite without grabbing for another book to check something she spontaneously remembered.

“Hermione, if you don’t get a full meal in, you’re not going to sleep —”

She dropped her fork suddenly, and it clattered against her plate. “Oh, my goodness.” Her wide eyes stared into the entrance hall. “Is that them? Is that the examiners?”

Ron and Harry both turned quickly. Through the open doors, they could see Umbridge standing with a small group of elderly witches and wizards. Ron watched Umbridge wring her hands nervously and he felt happier than he’d felt all day.

“Shall we go and have a closer look?” he suggested.
They quickly gathered their things and hurried to the door. They slowed to a more appropriate pace as they walked past, eyes on the bannister ahead of them, but ears purposely directed at the examiners.

One of the witches was especially tiny and stooped over. Her face had so many lines, Ron was reminded a gnarled oak on the edge of the Burrow’s property. She looked a lot like his Great-Aunt Tessie, if Aunt Tessie had been reduced to about half her size.

“Are you thirsty or anything, Professor Marchbanks?” Umbridge asked in her high, girlish voice.

“Journey was fine, journey was fine, we’ve made it plenty of times before.” Marchbanks sounded irritable, and raised her voice considerably.

Ron realized she was horribly hard of hearing. Would that make the exam easier or harder? He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and pretended to lace up his shoe, not willing to let go of a chance to watch Umbridge embarrass herself in front of the examiners.

“Now,” said Marchbanks, “I haven’t heard from Dumbledore lately!” She peered around the door into the Great Hall, as if he might be seated at his usual dinner post. “No idea where he is, I suppose?”

Umbridge cast a dark look at Harry and Hermione, who were hovering beside Ron while he fiddled with his shoelace. “None at all. But I daresay the Ministry of Magic will track him down soon enough.”

“I doubt it,” Marchbanks nearly shouted, “not if Dumbledore doesn’t want to be found.” She cackled, an eerie thing that reminded Ron a lot of a Hag, and he shivered. “I should know. Examined him personally in Transfiguration and Charms when he did N.E.W.T.s. Did things with a wand I’d never seen before.”

“Yes, well,” Umbridge said uneasily, “let me show you to the staffroom. I daresay you’d like a cup of tea after your journey.”

Ron, Harry, and Hermione dawdled on the stairs as long as they could, waiting until the examiners had rounded the corner towards Umbridge’s office, before finishing the trek up to the common room.

They resumed their individual study habits, but they didn’t last long. Harry gave up and went to bed early. Ron studied until his notes were blurry, and went upstairs, leaving Hermione alone with a stack of books beside the fireplace. Despite his exhaustion, he laid awake and stared up at the curtains for what felt like hours, his brain buzzing with Charms theory, wand movements, and questions. He’d told McGonagall in his Career Advice meeting he’d like to be an Auror or do something exciting abroad, like Charlie and Bill did. Either way, McGonagall had told him he would need a lot of O.W.L.s for those things. There didn’t seem to be a lot of hope for Ron in these next two weeks.

Eventually Ron fell asleep. He didn’t know exactly when or how long, but he awoke early that Monday morning along with Dean, Seamus, Harry, and Neville. No one spoke as they got ready for breakfast and their exam. Dean silently read his Charms notes over while waiting for the shower. Ron couldn’t bear the thought of looking at another page of text and practiced Summoning the pitcher of water to him. He succeeded in spilling water all over the floor, which Neville promptly slipped in on his way out of the bathroom, and at the very least, cleaning up the mess was distracting from their impending exam.
After breakfast, the fifth and seventh years waited outside the Great Hall. At nine-thirty, each class was called back in. The four House tables were gone. Instead, Ron saw nearly a hundred single tables, all with a roll of parchment face down. Students were seated in an alphabetical pattern, and each row alternated fifth-years and seventh-years, which put Ron very far from Harry and Hermione. He ended up to the right of Head Girl, Britta Marston, and behind Blaise Zabini. There were worse places he could be, certainly, even if he did feel surrounded by Slytherins.

When everyone was seated, all students looking up at her anxiously awaiting the start of the exam, McGonagall reached for the large hourglass on the desk and turned it over. “You may begin.”

Ron hastily flipped his paper and looked down at the first question.

a) Give the incantation, and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly.

Ron remembered their very first year, Hermione correcting his wand movement and pronunciation, and began to answer the question, marking with perfect accuracy where the stresses belonged on the incantation. He wondered if he would get extra marks for that.

The filed out of the Great Hall two hours later, students ranging through exhausted, relieved, and still incredibly anxious now that the exam was over. Ron felt like he fit more into the relieved category. Harry looked exhausted, and Hermione was certainly anxious.

“It wasn’t too bad, was it?” Hermione’s head swung between Harry and Ron. “I’m not sure I did myself justice on Cheering Charms, I just ran out of time — did you put in the countercharm for hiccups? I wasn’t sure whether I ought to, it felt like too much — and on question twenty-three —”

“Hermione,” Ron cut her off, trying very hard not to sound mean, “we’ve been through this before. We’re not going through every exam afterward, it’s bad enough doing them once.”

Hermione did not bring up the test again.

The four House tables returned for the students to eat lunch, and after Ron finished a hearty meal, fifth-year students were escorted to the small attached chamber where they waited to be called in for their practical. Seventh-years had to wait until the fifth-years were done.

They were called alphabetically in groups of four. Hermione was at the end of the fourth group. Ron, unfortunately, had to wait all the way until the end. He wiped sweat off of his brow and practiced the wand movement for Locomotion Charms.

After a few moments of waiting alone with Dean Thomas, Lisa Turpin, and Blaise Zabini, Ron was called forward for his practical. He Levitated the dinner plate fairly easily, but when he was asked to change the color of the dinner plate, it suddenly began to mutate into a mushroom and Ron couldn’t explain why. He didn’t dare tell Hermione, but he did mention it to Harry that night. Harry had accidentally enlarged his rat instead of changing it to orange. Even though they weren’t sure of the impact it would have on their scores, at least they had failed or succeeded together.

They didn’t have much time to commiserate. The fifth-years immediately set about studying for Transfiguration. They had a few hours before dinner while the seventh-years finished their practical, and they studied as late as they dared afterwards.

Ron struggled through the Transfiguration written portion. It had never been his best subject, and putting complex theory to words was the least of his strengths. The practical went better, though. He managed to Vanish everything but the tail of his rabbit, and Transfigured his tea kettle into a
passable owl, even if it still whistled shrilly.

Wednesday was Herbology, and Ron thought it went as well as it could have. He managed to do the repotting without any injury, though he may have sworn at the Fanged Geranium. Defense was next, and Ron breezed through that exam. He had Harry’s voice and Professor Lupin’s repeating spell definitions and encouragement throughout the written portion. And Ron, who had not only trained with the D.A., but had helped Harry through the Triwizard Tournament in fourth year, performed each counterjinx and defensive spell with ease. Umbridge, standing at the back of the room, only increased his confidence, making vanishing the boggart as easy as kicking off on his broom.

While Hermione took her Ancient Runes exam on Friday, Harry and Ron took a break from studying. They played a lazy game of wizard’s chess by the open window. Ron saw a path to catch Harry in check, but it required at least three more steps, and Ron wasn’t sure he had that sort of focus right now. He turned to the window and pointed to the edge of the forest.

“How’s teaching. What do you think it is?”

Harry got up from the game and looked out the window. “Dunno. Those look like third or fourth years?”

“Can’t tell from here. That the boys hanging back? Maybe it’s unicorns.”

“Oh, could be.”

Ron yawned. “We could take a walk. I feel like I’ve been cooped up here for ages.”

But as he said it, Hermione climbed through the portrait hole, looking furious.

“How were the runes?” Ron asked, and immediately regretted it.

“I mistranslated ‘ehwaz.’” Hermione dropped her book bag beside the nearest chair and sank into it. “It means ‘partnership,’ not ‘defense,’ I mixed it up with ‘eihwaz.’”

“That’s only one mistake,” Ron said comforting, stifling another yawn. “You’ll still get —”

“Oh shut up. It could be the one mistake that makes the difference between a pass and a fail. And what’s more, someone’s put another niffler in Umbridge’s office. I don’t know how they got it through that new door, but I just walked past there and Umbridge is shrieking her head off — by the sound of it, it tried to take a chunk out of her leg —”

“Good,” Ron and Harry said simultaneously.

“It is not good! She thinks it’s Hagrid doing it, remember? And we do not want Hagrid sacked!”

“Oh, you’re so naive sometimes, Harry. You really think Umbridge will wait for proof?” Hermione picked herself and her books back up and headed up to the girl’s dormitory, slamming the door shut behind her.

Ron rolled back over to the game. “Such a lovely, sweet-tempered girl.” He pushed his queen
forward to conquer Harry’s knight.

“She does have a point about Hagrid, though. Umbridge won’t wait for proof. She has it out for him.”

“One more month,” Ron said. “Hagrid’s just got to last one more month. It’ll be alright.”

If there was one good thing about their O.W.L.s schedule, it was that they had the weekend to devote to Potions, which was easily the subject Ron and Harry needed the most help in. He and Harry spent two full days cramming as much as they could, and when Ron sat down for the written exam, he wished they hadn’t wasted Friday. It was as difficult as he had expected. At the least, he was certain he got the Polyjuice Potion question right, since he and Harry had taken it in their second year.

The practical, at least, did not go as badly as it could have done. It was much easier to brew a potion in the wide space of the Great Hall. Though the windows had been blacked out to prevent sunlight from affecting anyone’s potion, the air still moved much more up here, and it helped that Snape wasn’t pacing the aisles, breathing down anyone’s neck. Ron felt confident that he’d at least achieved an “Acceptable.”

Hermione’s foul mood continued, complaining to anyone who would listen that she still had five exams to go. She was the only Gryffindor taking Arithmancy, and had no one to sympathize with her. Everyone else was beginning to feel like the worst of it was over.

Ron felt especially pressured to do well in Care of Magical Creatures. He had no desire to let Hagrid down. He managed to correctly identify the knarl without getting stuck with any of its quills, correctly handled a bowtruckle without breaking any of its limbs, and fed and cleaned a fire-crab easily. He felt like Hagrid’s love of dangerous creatures had well-prepared him for that. Finally, he prescribed treatment for a sick unicorn, and judging by the witch’s toothy grin as she marked his answers, Ron felt certain he had passed.

Wednesday was structured oddly. The morning was their written Astronomy exam, and the afternoon was for Divination. Then in the evening they would have their practical for Astronomy.

Ron had no hope for Divination. He’d hardly even studied for it. Even if Firenze was a much better teacher, Ron had no skill in the subject. The exam consisted of a tea leaf reading, a crystal ball reading, and a palm reading. Ron failed each one spectacularly. He embarrassed himself particularly awfully by describing what he thought was an unusually clear vision in the crystal ball — an ugly man with a wart on his nose — but it had actually been the reflection of his examiner.

“We shouldn’t have taken the stupid subject in the first place,” Harry said, once he had finished telling Ron he’d mixed up his examiner’s life lines and head lines and told her she should have died last Tuesday.

“Still, at least we can give it up now.”

“Yeah, no more pretending we care what happens when Jupiter and Uranus get too friendly.”

“And from now on, I don’t care if my tea leaves spell ‘die, Ron. die’ — I’m just chucking them in the bin where they belong.”

Harry laughed, but stopped abruptly as Hermione approached them. She’d been telling people off for laughing too loudly and had made a first year cry last night. She looked a lot better now.

“Well, I think I’ve done alright in Arithmancy,” she said. “Just time for a quick look over our star
charts before dinner then.”

Their practical Astronomy exam was not until eleven that night, so each Gryffindor was awake studying with tea and cocoa well after the sun went down. They trooped up to the Astronomy Tower together, and found the evening perfectly cloudless, with no excuses for a poor star chart. There were a handful of seventh-years taking Astronomy at the N.E.W.T. level, but they clustered together in the south-west corner, and everyone else set up their telescopes generally near their housemates. The test administrators, Tofty and Marchbanks, did not force them to arrange in alphabetical order, but they did make sure each telescope had a reasonable amount of space to minimize cheating, and they patrolled the tower throughout the examination.

Ron was never any good at memorizing, though he could pick out the planets easily enough, and a few of the major constellations. He struggled for seven minutes to find Lyra before realizing it had probably set earlier that day. Ron was just looking for the North Star, berating himself for not doing that first, when light spilled from the castle and onto the grounds. If the evening had not been so quiet and dark, Ron probably wouldn’t have noticed it at all. He glanced at Harry, but Harry had his eye jammed to his telescope. Ron filled in the Little Dipper.

He did not get much farther than that. There was a loud roar from Hagrid’s hut. Those nearest to Ron — Harry, Hermione, Dean, Susan, and Ernie — all peered over the edge of the parapet in the direction of Hagrid’s cabin.

Professor Tofty coughed. “Try and concentrate, now, boys and girls.”

None of them moved.

“Ahem — twenty minutes to go.”

Ron finished labeling the stars on the northern section of his chart, and checked some of his planet work in the south. He still had a large chunk in the east, near the moon, that he hadn’t filled in just yet.

Then there was a loud bang from the direction of Hagrid’s hut. Everyone turned now.

The door of the hut had opened suddenly, slamming against the side of the house. The light from inside silhouetted Hagrid’s large figure, and the shape of six more figures that chased him out of the house. One of them was unusually short and squat. Ron had just enough time to realize Umbridge was sacking Hagrid when six jets of red lights hit Hagrid in the chest.

“No!” Hermione shouted.

“My dear!” Professor Tofty said. “This is an examination.”

No one returned to their star charts. All students stared at the grounds below as the jets of red light continued to bounce off Hagrid. One man shouted, “Be reasonable, Hagrid!” amid the other cries and curses.

“Reasonable be damned,” Hagrid howled back, “yeh won’ take me like this, Dawlish!”

One of the Stunning Spells hit Fang, who had rushed to defend Hagrid. The dog fell limp and Hagrid shouted in rage. He picked up and threw the man who had hit his dog. The man flew ten feet before crumpling to the ground.

Ron, who had only known Hagrid to be gentle, paled in fear. Hagrid truly had giant’s blood running through him. His strength was indescribable.
“Look!” Parvati shrieked and pointed at the front doors of the castle. They had opened again, and a single black shadow was stalking out to the battle.

“Now, really!” Professor Tofty said, in a weak attempt to break up the commotion. “Only sixteen minutes left, you know!”

Not one head turned back to their examination. All eyes were trained on the lone figure running for Hagrid’s cabin.

“How dare you!” Professor McGonagall’s voice carried up to the tower as she shouted at Hagrid’s attackers. “How dare you! Leave him alone! Alone, I say! On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such —”

Exactly four jets of red light struck Professor McGonagall in the chest. Hermione, Parvati, Lavender, and Sally-Anne all screamed as McGonagall was lifted into the air and knocked onto her back. She did not move again.

“Galloping gargoyles!” Tofty shouted. “Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behavior!”

“Cowards!” Hagrid shouted. “Ruddy cowards! Have some o’ that! An’ that” One of his large, mighty hands swiped at his two closest attackers, and he swung the other at the other two. They immediately collapsed to the ground, out cold. Hagrid bent down and picked up Fang, slinging him over his shoulder.

“Get him, get him!” Umbridge screamed, but neither she nor her remaining assistant seemed interested in getting within reach of Hagrid’s fists.

Hagrid turned and ran towards the gates. Umbridge’s Stunning Spell futilely glanced off of his shoulder.

There was a long moment of silence before Professor Tofty cleared his throat and said, “Um… five minutes to go, everyone.”

Ron hastily filled in the stars surrounding the moon; he was sure he mixed up Vega and Arcturus, but he hardly cared. When Tofty called time for the exam and summoned their star charts to him, all the students erupted into chatter. “That evil woman,” Hermione spat out in a poorly hushed whisper as she shoved her telescope back into its case. “Trying to sneak up on Hagrid in the dead of night!”

“She clearly wanted to avoid another scene like Trelawney’s,” said Ernie Macmillan.

“Hagrid did well, didn’t he?” Ron tried to sound more confident than he felt, but he felt terrified of Umbridge and Hagrid all at once. “How come all the spells bounced off him?”

“It’ll be his giant blood.” Hermione latched the case of her telescope and lifted it. “It’s very hard to Stun a giant, they’re like trolls, really tough…. But poor Professor McGonagall,” her voice shook. “Four Stunners, straight in the chest. And she’s not exactly young, is she?”

“Did anyone alert Madam Pomfrey?” Harry asked, peering over the edge of the tower one more time.

But it seemed the commotion had carried through the castle. More lights were on now, and the silver moonlight reflected off of Pomfrey’s matron’s cap as she hurried onto the field with a stretcher in tow.
“Dreadful, dreadful,” Ernie said as they reached the bottom of the stairs. “Well, I’m off to bed. Night all.”

Slowly, the students began to drift away from the stairs, breaking apart inter-house conversations to carry on with their closer friends in hushed whispers.

“At least they didn’t get to take Hagrid off to Azkaban.” Ron remembered what Hagrid had said about his short stint in Azkaban three years ago. It didn’t surprise Ron that Hagrid had fought against them so hard. “I ’spect he’s gone to join Dumbledore, hasn’t he?”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. She pressed the back of her hand to the corner of her eye, staving off tears. “Oh, this is awful. I really thought Dumbledore would be back before long, but now we’ve lost Hagrid, too.”

When they reached the common room, many of the students had already been awoken by the commotion, and Dean and Seamus were filling everyone in on what had happened.

Hagrid was a favorite among Gryffindor, and McGonagall was their head of house. It seemed to hit them all the hardest, a bitter trend among Umbridge’s legacy. The common room remained full of people late into the night, each offering different solutions to Umbridge. Some suggested “pulling a Fred and George” and leaving amidst a grand explosion of chaos the next morning. Ron thought feeding Umbridge to a box of starving Blast-Ended Skrewts would be particularly just. Hermione spent most of the evening posted by the portrait, anxiously awaiting news of McGonagall.

But none came. It was nearly four am when Hermione finally decided to go to bed, to get some rest before their History of Magic exam the following afternoon.

Ron slept poorly, and that morning, he, Hermione, and Harry trooped down to breakfast wearily. The entire school buzzed with the events of the night before. Harry set a sharp glare on Umbridge for the entire meal, and Ron could practically hear Harry running over each revenge scenario Gryffindor students had pitched last night.

“We should study for History of Magic before lunch,” Hermione said.

They had until two, and Ron thought he would prefer a nap to studying. But Hermione had a point. History of Magic was one of his worst subjects.

“Let’s go,” he agreed wearily.

Upstairs in the common room, Ron and Harry went through Hermione’s notes with bleary eyes. They said not a word to each other as they tried and failed to review for their exam. They were exhausted, and it was a dull subject, and there was not much else they could do about it.

They spent a good four hours studying terribly before they headed back downstairs for lunch. They ate in silence, exhausted and anxious. Harry looked particularly worn, and Ron wondered if Harry had gotten any sleep at all.

While the students were eating, Filch entered suddenly through the side door and whispered something into Umbridge’s ear. Both adults turned and looked pointedly at Harry.

“What did you do?” Hermione hissed.

“Nothing!” Harry protested. “Not that it matters. It’s Umbridge. It could be about anything. Maybe she thinks I coughed in her direction.”
But Umbridge did not approach Harry. Instead, she hastily followed Filch out of the Great Hall.

“You don’t think she’s found Dumbledore, do you?” Ron asked.

“She would have looked much happier if that were the case,” Hermione said. “That certainly didn’t look like good news.”

Ron swallowed the last of his juice and hoped Umbridge was about to be fired somehow. Maybe the Minister was tired of hearing her high-pitched voice or seeing her girlish face, or maybe McGonagall had gotten better and Umbridge was going to lose her job over how she had handled the situation with Hagrid.

He shared these theories with Harry and Hermione, who were cheered by them, but not hopeful.

After lunch, the fifth-years collected outside the Great Hall. The air before this examination was different than the others. The students were exhausted and still on edge from what had happened the previous night.

Malfoy, boasting that, “The oaf was going to get what was coming to him eventually,” had several students glaring in the direction of the Slytherin students. Ron thought it might come to blows, but Britta Marston, Head Girl and fellow Slytherin, snapped at him to compose himself. Malfoy, red faced, was called into the examination hall shortly after with Ernie Macmillan, Roger Malone, and Morag MacDougal.

When the time came, Ron took his seat behind Blaise Zabini. Professor Marchbanks and Professor Tofty began the examination and Ron began to write.

He wasn’t sure what he was writing, honestly. Anything that sounded like it might have vaguely been said once in Professor Binns’s voice went into his answers. Ron was not sure if he could do worse than his Divination exam, but this one would certainly give it its best shot.

Ron was just beginning to make up some goblin names for the discord between Pierre Bonaccord and Lichtenstein when Harry let out a sudden shout and fell out of his chair.

Ron stood quickly, reminded vividly of Harry writhing around in his bed curtains, shouting, and telling them all that Arthur Weasley had been attacked. Professor Tofty urged the students to finish their exam, and hurried over to ask Harry what was wrong. Ron already knew what Harry’s sudden explosion of pain meant, though.

Someone somewhere was hurt.

Someone somewhere was dying.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
Out of the Fire

Chapter Summary

Harry has a thing about saving people.

Chapter Notes

I promised you that I wouldn't make you wait too long. I won't make you wait a moment longer. Read on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The corridor heading into the Department of Mysteries was as dark and cool as it always was. Just as he had each time before, Harry headed into the round room of a dozen doors. Purposefully, he crossed to the door in front of him and entered the room full of ticks and clicks and glittering glass. He paid it no mind. At the end of the room was another door, and this one opened into the biggest room yet.

Shelves and shelves lined the walls, high as the Great Hall of Hogwarts, disappearing into a dark ceiling. The shelves were filled to the brim with dusty orbs that seemed to glow yet did not provide any light to the room.

Harry hurried forward, past rows and rows and rows of spun glass. He stopped at aisle ninety-seven and turned left.

Closer and closer to his goal — what was his goal? Harry was not sure, but he would know it when he saw it.

At the very end of the aisle, a pile of black robes, curled up on the floor — no, kneeling on the floor.

Harry’s stomach tightened in anticipation, an eagerness that was not his own. He spoke in a voice that was not his own. “Prove your loyalty and retrieve it for me.”

The man’s voice was weak, weary. “My lord — I cannot — You know this —”

There was a scream and the figure on the floor writhed in pain. Harry heard the Crucius curse issue from his own mouth, but the voice was high and cold. As the figure writhed and twisted, Harry saw a brief glimpse of the man’s face, and Harry could not believe he had not recognized his voice first. But he had only ever heard it that desperate once before, in a memory, a memory of someone begging for Lily’s life.

Harry ended the curse and Severus Snape gasped for breath in his moment of reprieve.

“It was made to you,” Harry said, in that horrible voice. “You heard it. You could certainly retrieve it.”
“You know I cannot —”

“Crucio!” Harry felt a rush, the thrill of power as the man before him screamed in pain.

Snape gritted his teeth against the pain. “You know I am loyal only to you —”

“I have seen it — in Potter’s mind. You betrayed me. You went to Dumbledore. Because of you I wasted years, searching, futilely —”

“I came back. I have proven myself to you. It was — a moment — a moment of weakness, my lord — I have not faltered since — please —”

“You have been training Potter, teaching him toward his mind against me —”

“I have served you! None but you!”

Harry raised his wand and ended the curse.

Snape took a moment, nostrils flaring as he steadied his breath. “My lord, I have done everything at your command. I have ingratiated myself to Dumbledore. I have maintained my position at Hogwarts, my influence. Have you felt any resistance in your attempts to penetrate Potter’s mind? Has he not been more vulnerable to you these last few months? Please, my lord, I have not betrayed you.”

“You love her. Do you not?”

“No, my lord —”

“Liar! Crucio!”

Snape screamed.

“You will be the one to retrieve it for me, or you will die trying.”

And Harry, even as the words came from his mouth, collapsed at his desk in his exam and fell to the ground, screaming, as the pain in his scar threatened to split his head in two.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder, and someone asked if he was alright. Harry took in two shaky breaths and let Professor Tofty help him to his feet and escort him out of the hall.

“Is everything alright, Mr. Potter? That was quite a fit, perhaps the hospital wing —”

“I’m not going — I don’t need the hospital wing, I don’t want —”

Harry glanced behind him as the doors to the Great Hall closed. He caught a glimpse of everyone staring, of Professor Marchbanks asking Ron to take his seat again. Harry took in a deep breath and said, “I’m — I’m fine, sir. Really, I just… fell asleep… had a nightmare.” Harry wiped the sweat from his brow and could feel his hand still trembling.

“Pressure of examinations.” Professor Tofty clapped Harry on the shoulder. “It happens, young man, it happens! Now, a cooling drink of water, and perhaps you will be ready to return to the Great Hall? The examination is nearly over, but you may be able to round off your last answer nicely?”

“Yes… I mean… no…. No, I’ve done — done as much as I can, I think….”
“Very well, very well. I shall go and collect your examination paper. I suggest you go and have a nice lie down.”

“I’ll do that, yes, thanks very much.”

Harry hesitated as the squat, elderly wizard returned to the Great Hall. The moment the door clicked closed, Harry raced for the marble staircase and headed all the way up to the hospital wing. He thought of nothing but the pain in his forehead and the image of Snape writhing beneath Voldemort’s curse. He remembered saying, in Voldemort’s cruel tone, “I have seen it in Potter’s mind.”

Snape was in trouble, and it was Harry’s fault.

Harry burst through the doors to infirmary. Madam Pomfrey, who had been tending to Montague, screamed from the shock. The spoon she had been holding clattered to the ground, its blue contents spilling across the stone floor. Madam Pomfrey pressed her hand to her chest as she tried to steady herself.

“Potter — what do you think you’re doing?”

“I need to see Professor McGonagall!” Harry hardly had the breath after his run, and with his head throbbing, but he forced the words out. “Now, it’s urgent!”

“She’s not here.” Madam Pomfrey bent down and picked the spoon up. “She was transferred to St. Mungo’s this morning. Four Stunning Spells straight to the chest at her age? It’s a wonder they didn’t kill her.”

“She’s… gone?”

Harry could only stare at Madam Pomfrey. He could not believe what she had just said. There was no one left, then. No one left at Hogwarts for Harry to turn to, no members of the Order present….

“I don’t wonder you’re shocked, Potter. As if one of them could have Stunned Minerva McGonagall face on by daylight! Cowardice, that’s what it was, despicable cowardice. If I wasn’t worried what would happen to you students without me, I’d resign in protest.”

“Yes, right.” Harry swallowed as the bell rang. Corridors filled with noise as students poured into the hallways, many done for the day, some done for the weekend. And some, like those in Harry’s year, done for the school year.

“Should I get a hold of Professor Flitwick for you? Or Professor Sprout?”

Harry’s mouth felt dry, and though he knew the answer, he had to ask. “Is Professor Snape around?”

“I’m afraid he went into London with Professor McGonagall, to make sure everything was handled appropriately. But I’m sure —”

“No — thank you.”

Harry left the hospital wing. The corridor was crowded now. He did not know what to do. Snape had gone to London; the Ministry was in London. Perhaps Snape had stopped there or perhaps Voldemort had ordered him there to torture him….

Harry had to get to the mirror. He had to let his parents know.
Harry rushed through the crowd of students up to the Gryffindor dormitory. He regretted not having the mirror on him, but he had been concerned it could be confiscated during exams. As Harry ran, students shouted after him, demanding he look where he was going. Someone in a prefect badge yelled at him to slow down, but Harry didn’t listen. He stopped only when he reached the Fat Lady’s portrait to get the password out as quickly as he could, then ran inside and up the stairs to his dormitory.

None of his dorm mates were back yet. They would have only just finished their exam when Harry let the hospital wing. They might not be far behind. Harry had to hurry.

He dug into his bedside table, yanking out his nightclothes to uncover the mirror. He hardly had it in his hands as he called for his parents. “Mum — Dad — Sirius — Remus — is anyone there?”

The surface of the mirror fogged over, and when it cleared, Harry saw clearly the parlor of Grimmauld Place. The mirror was placed somewhere up high, perhaps on the fireplace mantle, and Harry had a good view of the room. It was empty.

“Mum — Dad — anyone?”

This had never happened before. Harry had never called and found no one. Sometimes he didn’t get his family, once he’d gotten Regulus, and once he’d gotten Tonks. But he had never had no one there before.

“Hello?” he tried again, desperate. Even if it was only Kreacher, someone had to be there to answer. Why was this happening now, when Harry needed someone the most?

Harry heard a creak and he saw movement in the corner of the room.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

Regulus approached the mirror and removed it from the mantle. “Harry. I thought I heard your voice. I’m quite surprised. I half expected you home by now.”

“What? Why —”

“What have you not heard from your parents? They received word this morning that Hagrid had run off and that McGonagall was in St. Mungo’s. They immediately decided that you wouldn’t be staying at Hogwarts if Snape was the only member of the Order still on the grounds. Is everything alright? You look rather ill.”

“It’s Snape.” Harry barely had room in his brain to process that his parents were pulling him out of Hogwarts. “I had a dream — a vision — about Snape, like I did with Mr. Weasley. Voldemort’s torturing him — he knows Snape’s a double-agent, and it’s my fault! Is anyone there? Someone needs to help him.”

“Slow down, Harry. Tell me exactly what you saw.”

“It was the Department of Mysteries — in the Ministry of Magic — Voldemort told Snape he knew he was in love with my mom, and he knew Snape had been teaching me Occlumency.”

“The Department of Mysteries…. Interesting…. ”

Harry did not know why this was so interesting, and he did not care. “Isn’t anyone there who can help?”
“Don’t you find it odd, Harry, that the Dark Lord has managed to infiltrate the Ministry of Magic with no one noticing?”

“Er — yes — but I’ve had these dreams before. When Mr. Weasley was hurt, and when Voldemort was torturing Avery — I felt it, and it felt like it does now. I’m connected to Voldemort somehow, and I don’t know how, or why, but I know that Snape’s in trouble, and I know it’s my fault. We have to do something.”

Regulus suppressed the tiniest smile. “‘We?’ Harry, what would you like the two of us to do? Go barging off to the Ministry to rescue Severus? Severus, who has been going between Dumbledore and Voldemort for an entire year. Severus, who hasn’t taught you much Occlumency at all, from what I hear. Is this the risk you want to take, Harry?”

“I have to — I have to do something! If I don’t, and something happens to Snape —”

The door to the dormitory door slammed open. Harry jumped at the sudden noise and the mirror slipped from his hands.

“No —”

It shattered on the floor. Harry barely had a moment to register its loss before there was a set of hands on his shoulders.

“Harry! We’re done!” Dean Thomas said. “We’re done with O.W.L.s, all exams — everything until September!”

“Come on downstairs,” Seamus said, robes still over his head as he changed from his school uniform into a Kenmare Kestrals T-shirt. “Sophie has firewhisky, and Parvati and Lavender said they’d sneak a bunch of food from dinner up here, so we can drink and eat while the other classes are still in the Great Hall.”

“Ah, did you break a mirror, mate?” Dean asked, just noticing the shards of glass. “Well, least it was after exams! Seven years bad luck can’t hurt your scores now!”

“Seven years bad luck?” Seamus asked. “What kind of superstition is that?”

“Wizards don’t have a broken mirror superstition? That’s rubbish. Everyone knows breaking a mirror is bad luck.”

Harry listened as their steps and conversations faded back down into the common room. He stared down at the broken shards of mirror scattered at his feet. He wasn’t sure what he should do. Would Regulus at least tell someone in the Order what he had seen? Or would Regulus persist in his distrust of Snape?

Harry had to tell someone else what he’d seen. But without Dumbledore, Hagrid, McGonagall, or Snape, he didn’t know where to turn. He had no mirror. He had no way to contact his parents.

His parents.

Regulus had said they were taking Harry from Hogwarts. Maybe they were here.

Harry threw open his trunk. He hadn’t used the Marauder’s Map since the D.A. had been disbanded. He hadn’t had a need. But now, maybe he could find his parents on it.

While Harry pushed aside rolls of parchment and spare bottles of ink, the door to the dormitory
opened once again, at a much more reasonable pace and volume. Ron, Neville, and Hermione rushed to his side.

“Harry!” Hermione said. “There you are — We’ve been looking everywhere. Are you alright?”

“What’s happened?” asked Ron.

“We checked the hospital wing first,” said Neville. “Madam Pomfrey said you took off running faster than a unicorn. We hoped you’d be here.”

Harry pulled the map from the bottom of the trunk and laid it out on the floor. Harry pointed his wand at the parchment. “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

The ink spread across the edges of the parchment and filled in the outline of the Hogwarts grounds. Names layered over each other in the Great Hall as students crowded together for dinner. The remaining Gryffindor fifth-years clustered in the common room, celebrating the end of exams. Some of the castle ghosts flitted about the trophy room.

While Harry searched for his parents’ names, he explained to Ron, Hermione, and Neville what he’d seen and what Regulus had said. His friends listened in stunned silence.

When Harry was done, Hermione said quietly, “I thought you said you were getting on in your Occlumency lessons.”

“Well — I lied. Snape kicked me out. Which was fine, because I wasn’t learning anything from him anyway.”

“I know you’re upset, but — don’t you think Regulus has a point?”

Harry looked up from the map. “What do you mean?”

“How could Snape and Voldemort have gotten into the Ministry? There are Aurors there, and half the Order works in the Ministry. If Voldemort is trying to keep his return a secret, why would he go to the Ministry?”

“He — he wanted Snape to get something for him. Whatever it is that Mr. Weasley was guarding at Christmastime, he wants Snape to get it for him. He said Snape had to get it or die trying.”

“You don’t think that… perhaps Voldemort is doing this on purpose? Dumbledore wanted you to learn Occlumency so you wouldn’t see these things.”

“That was so Voldemort couldn’t possess me. That’s what Dad said. I’m not possessed right now. If Snape is in trouble, we have to help him.”

“Do we?” asked Ron. “What has Snape ever done for us? You just said his Occlumency lessons were rubbish.”

“Do you really think that was on purpose?” Neville whispered. “Snape’s horrible, but he’s in the Order.”

Harry set his jaw, and, though he didn’t know it, he had never looked more like James and Lily’s son. “I know none of us like Snape, and I know sometimes his motivations are questionable, but right now he’s in trouble because of something I did. I’m going to do what I can to make it right.”

Hermione bit down on her lip. “I don’t see your parents anywhere on this map, Harry.”
“Then I’m going to the Ministry myself.”

“Harry!”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t — How will you even get there?”

“I’ll take Ron’s broom.”

“Like hell you will, mate,” said Ron. “I’m coming with you.”

“Me, too,” said Neville.

Harry quickly amended his plan. “Then we’ll take the One-Eyed Witch passage. It goes to Honeydukes. From there we can go to my parents’ house in Hogsmeade and Floo to the Ministry. It’ll take time, but we don’t have any other options.” The pain in Harry’s scar throbbed and Harry flinched. “We need to move quickly.”

“This is — I mean —” Hermione struggled for words as Harry cleared the map and stood. “You’re going to just leave Hogwarts? Never mind Umbridge, the Ministry could arrest you! And if Voldemort is there, what are the four of us going to do?”

“So then what do you suggest? We can’t get a hold of the Order and we can’t just leave Snape.”

“Alright. Fine. Harry — one last question, and please, Harry, think carefully. You’ve had dreams of the Department of Mysteries all year, haven’t you? Do you really think that each time you’ve had those dreams, Voldemort has been there, in the Ministry? Doesn’t that mean this dream might also not be everything it appears?”

Harry hesitated a moment, then tucked the Marauder’s Map into his robes. “Maybe. But there are some decisions we can live with and some we can’t. And if something is truly happening to Snape right now, I can’t live with doing nothing when I could have tried. I won’t make you come with me. It’s a risk, but it’s a risk I have to take.”

It only took Hermione a moment to make up her mind. “I couldn’t live with letting you do this alone.” She waved her wand and gathered up the shards of the mirror and lowered them into one of the clean socks Harry had tossed out of his trunk in his frantic search for the Marauder’s Map. She set the sock on Harry’s bedside table. “Maybe Mr. Potter or Sirius can fix it when we get back.”

Her voice wavered a bit as she said it, and Harry remembered the photograph Mad-Eye Moody had shown him at the end of summer, of the Order at the beginning of the war, and everyone that had been lost, and the sacrifices each member had made. His parents had only been a couple years older than they were now. Harry knew just how much he was asking of his friends.

But when he locked eyes with Neville, Harry realized that asking them to stay behind would be fruitless. Each of them had already made their choice, and they all understood the risk.

Harry grabbed the pocketknife he’d gotten from Remus and Sirius one Christmas, unsure how locked his parents kept the cottage. He looked at the Invisibility Cloak, but with all four of them, he wasn’t sure they would fit. His wand, the map, and the pocketknife would have to be enough.

Harry, Ron, Neville, and Hermione went back downstairs to the common room. Sophie Roper was pouring firewhisky into small glasses and sliding them across the table to Dean, Seamus, Lavender, and Parvati. Angelina, Alicia, and Lee were not far off, celebrating the end of their exams with
Hermione gritted her teeth. “They can’t have firewhisky in the common room! Just because McGonagall’s not here —”

Ron grabbed her wrist. “Let it go, Hermione. It’s better if they don’t notice us leaving.”

Harry was the first one out the portrait. He checked the map while the others climbed out.

“Umbridge is in her office. Filch is at the entrance hall. Peeves is outside the library, though. We’ll have to take a long way around.” The last thing Harry wanted was Peeves announcing their exit for the whole school to hear.

Harry had his eyes on the map, but he was so focused on Umbridge and Peeves, on making sure they didn’t move towards the passage or Gryffindor Tower, that Harry bumped right into Ginny as he rounded the corner.

“Hey, watch it,” she said, just managing to steady herself against the wall. “Where are you —”

Ginny saw their grim expressions. “What’s happened?”

None of them said anything. Harry did not want to tell her, did not want to drag her into this deadly adventure. He did not think anyone else did, either.

Ginny folded her arms over her chest and took up the walkway. “Really?” She locked eyes with Harry, who looked away, then Ron, who stared back and continued to say nothing. “You’re all unbelievable. Neville, tell me what you’re doing.”

“You-Know-Who has Snape,” Neville said. “We’re going to rescue him.”

“You’re not coming,” Ron said quickly.

“Like hell I’m not. Did you tell the Order?”

“We tried,” said Harry. “I told Regulus, but I don’t know if he’ll pass the message on.”

“Regulus? Regulus Black? The vampire?”

Luna appeared behind Ginny, looking as if she had wandered in while dreaming, and still hadn’t quite woken up yet.

Ginny said, “We were going to grab dinner then work on our Astronomy paper. Looks like we’re putting it on hold.”

“No,” Ron said, then looked to Harry and Hermione for help. “Tell her she’s not coming.”

“We’re not going where?” asked Luna.

“To rescue Snape,” said Ginny. “But we are going. Where is he?”

“The Ministry,” said Neville.

“No!” Ron shouted.

“Shush!” hissed Hermione. “You’re the one who just said we can’t draw attention to ourselves.”

“How will you get there?” Luna asked.
“We’re going to Hogsmeade,” Harry said, “and using the Floo Network from there.”

“That’ll take ages,” Ginny said. “And you could get caught. The Ministry’s watching all the Floo Network for Dumbledore and Regulus Black. Use Umbridge’s office. I bet no one’s watching that.”

Harry looked to Hermione. “Can you use the Floo Network to get in and out of Hogwarts? I know my parents have done it in Dumbledore’s office but that’s… Dumbledore’s office. That’s different.”

Hermione frowned. “Hogwarts isn’t usually on the Floo Network, but if anyone’s office is, it would be Umbridge’s.”

“It’s a great idea,” said Ron. “Ginny, you distract Umbridge. Tell her Peeves is —”

“I’m not on distraction duty so you can leave without me,” Ginny snapped. “You can pay Colin Creevey for that. Or for Harry he’ll do it for free.”

“We don’t have time for this,” said Harry. “We need someone to distract Umbridge, and we’ll need lookouts to keep the corridor clear. Ron should distract Umbridge. You’re a prefect, she’ll believe you more than any of us.”

“But Hermione —”

“Hates Umbridge and Umbridge hates her almost as much as she hates me. Luna, Ginny, you need to be the lookouts.” Harry handed the Marauder’s Map to Ginny before she could fight him. “Use that to make sure Umbridge is clear.”

“You’re not leaving me behind!” said Ron.

“Do you have a better plan?” Harry asked.

No one said anything. Ron looked like he very much wanted to say something, and his face turned red searching for some way to improve Harry’s plan, but nothing came to him.

“Fine. Ginny, is Umbridge still in her office?”

Ginny checked the map. “No. It looks like she’s heading down to talk to Filch. You can cut her off if you take the passage near Basil Fronsac’s portrait.”

“I’ll take the Cloak and sneak into her office after you’ve gone,” Ron said.

“Don’t you dare get caught with my Cloak.” It was a poor attempt at humor, but Harry tried to smile.

Ron tried to smile back. And then he left.

Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna headed downstairs towards Umbridge’s office.

Ginny checked the map when they reached the third floor. “Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle are coming up the steps. Quick, in here.” She led the group into an empty classroom across the hallway.

Everyone held their breath as Crabbe and Goyle’s heavy footsteps passed.

But Harry didn’t have time or energy to stress about his History of Magic O.W.L. nor Malfoy’s arrogance. His mind was solely on Snape and getting to the Department of Mysteries. His head pounded and he felt glad he’d given Ginny the map. It was one less thing he had to focus on, something he could trust to someone else.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Harry?” Hermione whispered. “You look ill.”

“It’s hurt worse before.” Harry remembered being sick from the pain the night Mr. Weasley had been attacked. It wasn’t that bad, not yet.

“Clear,” Ginny said, and opened the door. When they reached the corridor for Umbridge’s office, Ginny stopped. “I’ll stay here. I’ll tell people someone’s let off Garroting Gas. Luna, you take the other end and do the same.”

Harry had never been more grateful for Ginny Weasley.

As they walked, Hermione polished her prefect badge. Harry wondered if it was to make her look more authoritative, like they knew what they were doing, or if she was feeling guilty about what they were doing. Maybe both.

Hermione stood beside Harry, eyes on the corridor. Luna continued to the other end of the corridor, her sing-song voice apologizing for the inconvenience, “but you really don’t want to go down this way — no, no, quite alright, just the gas.”

Neville, too, took up a post beside Hermione, each keeping an eye down the corridor, while Harry opened up the penknife’s attachments and set to work on Umbridge’s door. Sirius had taught him how to do this a long time ago, long before Harry had had a wand. Harry was out of practice, but the lock was not particularly complicated. It clicked open after only a moment of work.

Hermione flinched as Harry pushed the door open, but nothing happened. She sighed in relief. “I thought she might have added extra security after the second niffler.”

Neville made a noise that sounded a bit like a strangled whimper. “Maybe you could have warned Harry before he opened the door?”

“It wouldn’t have stopped him.”

Harry knew she was right. He put the penknife away and stepped into Umbridge’s office. His stomach, already weak from the pain in his scar and his fear and guilt over what was happening to Snape, threatened to upheave itself just from being in here again. Between the mewling kittens, the lace doilies over everything, and the sickly sweet scent of Umbridge’s perfume, Harry thought he would be sick.

He swallowed down his disgust and headed for her fireplace. He moved a pair of teacups and a glass vase of pink flowers before he finally found a small jewel-encrusted jar. He pulled it down and opened it up, revealing the green Floo powder ash inside. He looked up at Neville and Hermione.

“You’re sure you’re coming with? If I’m wrong —”

“We’ve made up our minds, Harry,” said Hermione.

“We wouldn’t let you do this alone,” said Neville.

There was a shout from the hallway and the distinct sound of a jinx colliding with stone.
“Umbridge,” Hermione hissed, and whipped out her wand.

Harry grabbed a fistful of the Floo powder and threw it into the fire. The flames turned green. He heard Neville get out half of a curse as he stepped into the fire. He opened his mouth to shout for the Ministry of Magic, but something grabbed him and yanked him back into Umbridge’s office. The back of his head slammed into her desk. His vision went dark briefly. He fumbled for his wand, but it was snatched from his hand. He was hauled to his feet and he barely had his spotty sight back when small, pudgy fingers with sharp nails attached to them tightened in his hair. Harry was yanked to his feet and his head craned back.

“You think,” Umbridge’s shrill voice rang loudly in his ear, nearly drowning out the pain in his scar, “that after two nifflers I was going to let one more foul, scavenging little creature enter my office without my knowledge? I had Stealth Sensoring Spells placed all around my doorway after the last one got in, you foolish boy! Why are you in my office?”

She yanked on his head again, craning his neck backwards. Harry’s view of the ceiling went from spotty to white as he struggled to find a suitable lie.

“I was — looking for my Firebolt.”

“Liar! Your Firebolt is under strict guard in the dungeons, as you very well know, Potter. You were in my fireplace. Where were you trying to go?”

“No where —”

“Liar!” she shrieked again and this time she threw him at her desk. Harry felt the air leave his lungs as his stomach slammed into the desk’s corner. Before Harry could stand up, Umbridge put her hand on his neck and her wand next to his face.

Harry looked away from her wand and saw Hermione pinned into the wall by Millicent Bulstrode, and Crabbe had his arm around Neville’s neck. Malfoy was leaning against Umbridge’s window sill, twirling Harry’s wand in his hand.

The door opened and Harry dared to turn and look, even as Umbridge’s grip tightened on his neck. Cassius Warrington entered, with Ron pinned, disarmed, and gagged, and behind him came Goyle and Pansy Parkinson with Ginny and Luna. Lastly, to Harry’s surprise, Adrian Pucey entered with Cedric Diggory.

“Got ‘em all,” said Warrington. “Diggory tried cursing us when we caught Weasley, so we brought him along, too.”

“Good, good,” Umbridge said. Harry could practically hear her pleased smile. “Well, it looks as though Hogwarts will shortly be a Weasley-free zone, doesn’t it?”

Malfoy was the only one who laughed. Harry might have forgiven him if it was a pity laugh, or an attempt to impress Umbridge, but Malfoy just had a terrible sense of humor.

“And it seems I was quite right to tell your parents they had no authority to pull you out of school just to take you to Dumbledore. That is where you were going, isn’t it? To join his army? I absolutely could not allow you to leave under such circumstances. Tell me, where is Dumbledore?”

“How should I know?” Harry snapped.

“I see.” Umbridge’s girlish voice cooled. “Malfoy, fetch Professor Snape and ask for another bottle
of Veritaserum, please. I used the other bottle in my last interrogation of Potter.”

“Professor Snape’s not back from London yet,” said Adrian Pucey. Everyone turned to look at him, except Harry, who made meaningful eye contact with Hermione.

“Er — “ Adrian flushed red. “I saw Britta Marston not long ago. She was helping the first years’ Potions study group tonight — until he got back —” Adrian paused, and as if he couldn’t stop himself, mumbled, “so she couldn’t walk down to the lake with me tonight.”

“I see,” Umbridge said. She let go of Harry and began to pace the room. “Very well…. Very well….”

Harry considered how quickly he could get around Umbridge’s desk and tackle Malfoy for his wand. Umbridge already had her wand out, but she was distracted, pacing and talking to herself….

“I am left with no alternative…. This is more than a matter of school discipline…. This is an issue of Ministry security…. Yes… yes….”

If he moved now —

“You are forcing me, Potter…. I do not want to.”

Harry froze. Though Umbridge still seemed unsure of herself, her attention was all on him.

“The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue,” said Umbridge.

“No,” Hermione shrieked. “Professor Umbridge — it’s illegal — Please — The Minister wouldn’t want you to break the law!”

“What Cornelius doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” Umbridge, for all her indecision a moment ago, she now sounded quite excited about the decision she’d just made. “He never knew I ordered dementors after the Potters last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel Harry and discredit his parents all the same.”

“You sent the dementors to my house?” Harry dared to turn his head to look at her, and ignored the way her wand dug deeper into his neck.

“Somebody had to act. They were all bleating about silencing you somehow — discrediting you all — but I was the one who actually did something about it. Only you wriggled out of that one, didn’t you, Potter? Not today, though, not now.”

Umbridge raised her wand. Harry flinched, prepared for the pain of the curse he’d experienced a year ago. He heard Adrian Pucey yelp and Cedric grunt as they scuffled in the doorway. Umbridge took in a deep breath.

“Cruc —”

“No!” Hermione screamed. “No, Harry — Harry, we’ll have to tell her!”

“No,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“We’ll have to, Harry, she’ll force it out of you anyway, what’s — what’s the point?” And Hermione began to sob.

“Well, well, well!” Umbridge smiled. “Little-Miss-Question-All is going to give us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!”
“I’m — I’m sorry, everyone,” Hermione buried her face into her hands, “but I can’t stand it —”

Umbridge grabbed Hermione’s shoulders and pushed her into the chair behind the desk. “That’s right girl, now, tell me, with where was Potter headed?”

“He — he was trying to get to Professor Dumbledore.”

“So you do know where Dumbledore is then? Tell me.”

“Well — no! We were going to Harry’s parents, so that they could get a message to Dumbledore….”

“What was the message? Spit it out, girl!”

“We… we wanted to tell him it’s r-ready!”

“What’s ready?” Umbridge grabbed Hermione and shook her the way she had shaken Marietta Edgecombe. “What’s ready, girl?”

“The… the weapon.”

“Weapon? Weapon?” Umbridge stopped shaking Hermione. “You have been developing some method of resistance? A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore’s orders, of course?”

“Y-y-yes,” Hermione continued to sob, “but he had to leave before it was finished and n-n-now we’ve finished it for him and we h-h-have to tell him.”

“What kind of weapon is it?”

“I don’t r-r-really understand it.” Hermione sniffed. “We j-j-just did what P-P-Professor Dumbledore told us t-t-to do.”

Umbridge straightened and leveled her wand at Hermione. “Lead me to the weapon.”

“I’m not showing them!” Hermione pointed at Malfoy and the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad.

“It is not for you to set conditions. Come. On your feet, girl!”

“Fine!” Hermione began to sob into her hands again, and Harry realized he was not sure she had shed a single tear. “Fine, let them see it. I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you’d invite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th-that would serve you right. Oh, I’d love it if the whole school knew where it was, and how to u-use it, and then if you annoy any of them they’ll be able to s-sort you out.”

Harry was not sure he had ever realized just how stunning a liar Hermione was. Her words had the exact impact on Umbridge that she had hoped. Her toad-like face glanced at the members of the Inquisitorial Squad and took in their hungry faces. When Umbridge spoke again, she used her sweet, girlish voice.

“Alright, dear, let’s make it just you and me… and we’ll take Potter too, shall we? Get up, now.”

“Professor,” said Malfoy, pocketing Harry’s wand, “Professor Umbridge, shouldn’t some of the Squad come with you to look after —”

“I am a fully qualified Ministry official, Malfoy, do you really think I cannot manage two wandless
teenagers alone?” Her girlish voice was gone, and she was sharp and stern with Malfoy. “In any case, it does not sound as though this weapon is something that school children should see. You will remain here until I return and make sure none of the others escape.”

Malfoy folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the window again, with a sulky expression. “Alright.”

“Now you two go ahead of me and show me the way,” Umbridge said, pulling Harry to his feet, but keeping her wand against his back. “Lead on.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
Hermione’s lie had been so simple, but it had worked so well. Umbridge had followed Hermione and Harry out of the castle without any further questions. But of course it had to work. Hermione had given Umbridge everything she’d wanted.

Harry had told Hermione how Dumbledore had taken the fall for the D.A. Fudge had been so willing to give into Dumbledore’s lie even though the idea was absurd, simply because he wanted Dumbledore to take the fall. Umbridge was no different.

Hermione led Umbridge across the grounds of Hogwarts, quickly and with purpose; if she hesitated in the slightest it could expose her lie. She had to get Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest.

“It’s hidden in Hagrid’s hut, is it?” asked Umbridge as Hermione turned north.

Hermione only told Umbridge what she wanted to hear. “Of course not. Hagrid might have set it off accidentally.”

“Yes, yes he would have done, of course, the great half-breed oaf.”

Hermione could feel Harry’s anger radiate off of him. He kept close pace behind her, and Umbridge jogged behind him, her fat squat little legs struggling to keep up with them. Hermione understood Harry’s hatred of Umbridge, and she knew why a word like “half-breed” was so offensive to Harry. It hurt her, too. Still, she hoped Harry could reign in his temper just a little bit longer. She just needed to get Umbridge out of the way if they were to help Professor Snape.

As they passed Hagrid’s hut, Umbridge asked, “Then… where is it?”
“In there, of course.” Hermione pointed at the treeline. “It had to be somewhere that the students weren’t going to find it accidentally, didn’t it?”

“Of course...” Umbridge looked hesitant. Hermione wondered if she’d taken the lie too far. “Of course, very well then. You two stay ahead of me.”

“Can we have your wand, then, if we’re going first?” Harry asked.

“No, I don’t think so, Mr. Potter.” Umbridge prodded him forward. “The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I’m afraid.”

Hermione restrained herself from rolling her eyes in absolute disgust as she continued into the Forbidden Forest. She had spent most of her life studying, working to educate herself. She’d been a voracious reader in primary school, and scored well on all her exams. Her teachers had fostered that love of learning, and though Hermione did not approve of nor get along with every teacher at Hogwarts, she had still, mostly, been encouraged to pursue her education with that same voracity. Professor Snape and Umbridge were notable exceptions.

Hermione disliked them both for similar reasons — they taught their subject poorly, they favored students based on flattery, and they judged her for her parentage. Now one of them was in danger, and she was trying to save him. The other Hermione was about to throw headfirst into danger.

Hermione had suffered enough under Umbridge and she knew Harry had suffered more. She did not feel an ounce of guilt.

“Is it very far in?” Umbridge tugged her robe free of a bramble and tore the hem.

“Oh yes. Yes, it's well hidden.”

Harry was practically stepping on her heels, he was so close behind her. “Er — Hermione, are you sure this is the right way?”

“Oh yes.” Hermione pushed past a sapling’s branch and it snapped beneath her hand. She continued to make noise as she walked, kicking her way through brush. She wanted the attention of the forest.

Umbridge took a tumble over a tree root, but Hermione continued her pace undeterred. “It’s a bit further in!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Hermione, keep your voice down,” Harry hissed. “Anything could be listening in here —”

“I want us heard,” she said. “You’ll see.”

She could tell by Harry’s face he did not approve of this idea, but she couldn’t tell him her plan, not with Umbridge so close behind.

Hermione pressed on, deeper. The trees grew together thickly, nearly blocking out the evening sun. She hoped they would not have to travel much more. If they were to get back to the Ministry, they were running out of time.

“How much farther?” Umbridge shouted.

Hermione appreciated the frustration in Umbridge’s voice. “Not far now! Just a little bit —” She choked back a scream as an arrow sailed just over her head and thudded into the tree just behind her.
Umbridge did not restrain a scream and took cover behind Harry. Hooves pounding on soft earth filled the forest. The ground shook beneath them as the sound grew louder. It was only a moment before the three of them were surrounded by nearly fifty centaurs and centaurides. Each had an arrow drawn, and Hermione, Harry, and Umbridge were herded into the center of a clearing. Despite the obvious danger, Hermione could not help but smile.

The chestnut centaur Magorian, whom Hermione and Harry had met a month earlier on their trip into the forest with Hagrid, approached. He pointed his bow at them. “Who are you?”

Umbridge raised her wand, but her hand trembled even as she did.

“I asked you who you are, human.” Magorian’s deep voice seemed to reverberate through the trees.

“I am Dolores Umbridge,” she squeaked out. “Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!”

Hermione had not imagined Umbridge would fall into the trap so easily, but fall she had. Hermione almost wished it had been more challenging.

“You are from the Ministry of Magic?” Magorian asked. Many of the centaurs surrounding them shifted and muttered to each other. It sounded as if the forest itself protested Umbridge’s position.

“That’s right!” Umbridge seemed to be gaining confidence. “So be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human —”

A dark-coated centaur rushed forward. “What did you call us?”

“Don’t call them that!” Hermione snapped at Umbridge. She had not expected Umbridge to be this foolish. Perhaps she should have.

Hermione looked up at the black centaur who had approached, bow still aimed at Umbridge. It was Bane, the same centaur who had threatened to kill her, Harry, and Hagrid last month. Hermione’s confidence in her plan wavered. She felt afraid for the first time.

Umbridge did not seem to hear Bane nor Hermione. She continued, “Law Fifteen B states clearly that ‘Any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions —”

“‘Near-human intelligence?’” Bane repeated with a roar.

“Our intelligence far outstrips your own,” said Magorian.

A gray-haired centauride stepped forward. “What are you doing in our forest? Why are you here?”

“Your forest?” Umbridge shrieked. Her fear, it seemed, gave way to her pride. “I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land —”

The gray centauride let her arrow flight and it clipped Umbridge’s hair. Umbridge screamed in terror while the centaurs’ laughter echoed in the forest.

“Filthy half-breeds!” Umbridge shouted.

“Shut up!” Hermione said, but Umbridge was not listening.
“Beasts! Uncontrolled animals! *Incarcerous!***”

From her wand erupted thick rope that wrapped itself around Magorian’s chest, binding his arms. His bow dropped to the floor and he reared back. The ground shook as the centaurs rushed forward to attack Umbridge.

Hermione was frozen in fear for a moment, afraid for her life and for Harry’s, until Harry pulled her back towards the edge of the clearing. They ducked out of the way of the centaurs and Umbridge’s curses, but didn’t quite make it to the treeline. A centaur cut off their path and herded them back towards the center.

A flash of red light flew over Hermione’s head and struck the centaur before them in the chest. This was followed by Umbridge screaming loudly. Hermione turned in time to see Bane lift Umbridge into the air by the back of her pink cardigan. Her wand fell from her hand.

Harry dove for it, but Hermione pulled him back just in time — a centaur’s hoof slammed into the ground and snapped the wand in two. There was a brief spark and for a moment the forest seemed silent, save for Umbridge’s screams.

“No! Unhand me!” Umbridge shrieked. “I am Senior Undersecretary — you cannot — High Inquisitor — Unhand me you animals! Half-breeds —”

But Bane was galloping away, carrying Umbridge off through the trees. A few of the centaurs followed him.

The centaur that had herded Hermione and Harry back into the clearing grabbed Harry. The gray centauride grabbed Hermione.

“And these?” the centauride asked.

“They are young,” said one centaur. “We do not take foals.”

Hermione turned, surprised to recognize Ronan, the red centaur she had met during her first year.

“They brought her here,” argued the centaur holding Harry. “And they are not so young… This one is very nearly a man.”

“Please,” Hermione said, “please, don’t attack us. We don’t think like her. We aren’t Ministry of Magic employees! We only came here because we hoped you’d drive her off for us —”

Hermione did not even realize she had made a mistake until she was lifted off the ground as the centauride holding her moved quickly, stamping hooves against the ground in frustration.

“You see, Ronan?” the centauride shouted. “They already have the arrogance of their kind! So we were to do your dirty work, human girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies, like obedient hounds?”

“No!” Hermione, for all her studying and research, could not think how to explain herself in a way they would trust her. “Please — I didn’t mean that! I just hoped you’d be able to — to help us —”

But those words were not any better.

“We do not help humans!” Another centaur pushed his way through the crowd towards them. “We are a race apart and proud to be so. We will not permit you to walk from here, boasting that we did your bidding!”
“We’re not going to say anything like that!” Harry shouted. “We know you didn’t do anything because we wanted you to —”

But the centaurs were not listening to Harry.

“They came here unasked!” one shouted. “They must pay the consequences! If they came here to be a part of the wizards’ war against us centaurs, let them be a part of it!”

“Let them join the witch!” another said.

Hermione, now terrified, felt real tears sliding down her cheeks, the tears she had wished she could conjure back in Umbridge’s office. “Please — you said you didn’t hurt the innocent! We haven’t done anything to hurt you, we haven’t used wands or threats, we just want to go back to school, please, let us go back —”

“Perhaps you thought us pretty talking horses?” the centauride holding her snarled. “We are our own people, and we do not stand for wizards’ invasions and insults! We do not recognize your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority!”

“We don’t think we’re superior!” Harry shouted. “We’re not like Umbridge. We’re friends of Remus Lupin! The werewolf!”

Hermione did not know why Harry chose to bring up Lupin. The centaurs were not even fond of Hagrid these days, and she did not understand what he could be thinking. It did not seem especially successful. A few of the centaurs laughed, as if Harry’s statement was absurd.

Magorian however, stilled and came closer to Harry. His tail swished as he looked over Harry.

“Little Lupin chose wizarding society. He is little better than any other wizard. Why do you bring him up?”

“Because — I’m saying we’re not like the Ministry. We understand. We came here without our wands. Umbridge was going to torture us. Please, let us go. We have someone we need to help.”

The centauride holding Hermione was also still now. “That witch, torturing her own kind? Her own young?”

“We’re not hers —” Hermione protested, but quickly stopped talking when Harry shot her a look. She had talked her and Harry into this mess, she had to let be the one to talk them out of it.

Ronan pushed his way toward Magorian and spoke quietly into his ear.

Magorian turned back to Harry and frowned. “You are Harry Potter, friend of Lupin?”

“Yeah — yeah, I remember I’ve met you, Ronan, years ago —”

“We are not to involve ourselves in the affairs of wizards,” Magorian said loudly, to the herd surrounding them. “The stars have foretold of their war, apart from us, and we —”

But whatever Magorian was going to say was lost in a loud crash. Another followed it, and a third, and a tree fell into the clearing. The centauride dropped Harry, and she rushed towards Harry, reaching him just as the forest parted for Hagrid’s half-brother, Grawp.

Grawp looked down at them, his head brushing the canopy of the trees. His uneven mouth hung open and he squinted down at them. The ropes Hagrid had used to keep Grawp restrained trailed
after Grawp, snapped by the young giant’s brute strength.

“Hagger,” Grawp said.

Hermione ran through the list of words she knew that sounded like “hagger” and came up with haggard, hag, and haggle. None of them seemed relevant here.

“Get away from here, giant!” Magorian shouted. “You’re not welcome here!”

Hermione did not think Grawp could understand. She wasn’t sure he would listen even if he did.

Grawp continued to survey the crowd below, and repeated his request: “Hagger!”

“He’s trying to say Hagrid,” Hermione realized, suddenly, then held back a scream as Grawp lowered his face toward her and Harry. She clung tightly to Harry’s arm, terrified Grawp would crush them or open is mouth and swallow them whole.

“Hermy,” Grawp said.

Hermione nearly fainted. She had never felt so dizzy with fear before. “Goodness. He — remembered.”

“Hermy!” Grawp shouted at them, and a smell like rotten meat spilled from his mouth. “Where Hagger?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione gasped out. “I’m sorry, Grawp, I don’t know.”

“Grawp want Hagger!”

Hermione screamed as Grawp lowered his hand towards her and Harry. She tried to turn and run, but her legs gave out beneath her and she stumbled into the trunk of the tree Grawp had knocked over. Harry was right beside her, helping her to her feet, as the centaurs let loose a stream of arrows, striking Grawp in the face and hand. Grawp yelled and straightened. His feet stomped into the ground, and centaurs scattered to the trees.

Blood from Grawp’s wounds dripped down onto Harry and Hermione, and the young giant charged into the clearing. Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand and they ran.

Hermione was not even certain they were running back towards the castle. She let Harry lead as they stumbled through the forest, until the sound of centaur hooves and giant feet had faded behind him. She paused to catch her breath, but Harry pulled her onwards. They stumbled into a trail and Hermione could not help herself. She sank to her knees.

Harry finally stopped. “We need to get back to the castle. We need our wands.”

“I know,” she said, stifling a cry. She was overwhelmed. She only needed to breathe. “I know, I just need a minute.”

“Snape may not have a minute.”

Hermione pushed herself back onto her feet. Her legs still felt shaky. She glanced over her shoulder. “I hope Grawp doesn’t kill them….”

“I think they’ll manage,” Harry said.

Hermione hoped he was right.
“Did you take her into the woods to off her?” called a familiar voice.

Harry and Hermione turned to see Ron push his way through the brush, and with him came a crowd of students. Ginny, at the front, Marauder’s Map out, had several scratches running down her cheek. Neville was beside her, right eye purple and swollen. Luna looked dazed, but she usually looked dazed. Cedric was holding his left shoulder, as if it had been hurt, and behind him were Amber and Pearl Lais. Hermione could not imagine where they had all come from.

“How did you get away?” Hermione asked as Ron handed her and Harry their wands.

“Couple of Stunners, a Disarming Charm, and Neville brought off a really nice little Impediment Jinx.” Ron grinned at them, though his lip was still bloody from the fight. “Ginny was best. She got Malfoy — Bat-Bogey Hex. It was superb. His whole face was covered in the great flapping things. Amber and Pearl helped us get the jump on them, though. They came looking for Cedric. When we’d done with the Inquisitorial Squad, we looked out the window and saw you heading into the forest. What’ve you done with Umbridge?”

“Carried away by centaurs,” said Harry. “Possibly squashed by a giant by now.”

“I always knew there were giants in the Forbidden Forest,” said Luna. “Dumbledore takes tea with them, you know.”

“Sure,” said Ron, while Amber snickered. “What’s the plan now, Harry?”

Harry rubbed at his forehead. “I — I don’t know. We all heard Pucey — Snape hasn’t been at the castle all day. He’s got to be at the Ministry. But there’s no way we can get to Umbridge’s Floo now. We could try the Whomping Willow passage to Hogsmeade….”

“I could Apparate,” Amber suggested. “Cedric, too.”

“You can’t Apparate from Hogwarts,” Hermione said sharply.

“We could from Hogsmeade,” Amber said.

Cedric shook his head. “We’ve never done Side-Along. Even if we each took one of you, we could Splinch you or ourselves. And you’re all underage. We’d set off the Trace. It isn’t worth the risk.”

“We’ll have to fly, won’t we?” said Luna.

“Okay,” Harry snapped, “first of all, ‘we’ aren’t doing anything if you’re including yourself in that, and second of all, Ron’s the only one with a broomstick that isn’t guarded by a security troll —”

“I’ve got a broom!” Ginny said.

“Yeah, but you’re not coming,” said Ron.

“Of course I am! It’s because of me Malfoy’s stuck back in Umbridge’s office with the giant flying bogey’s attacking him.”

Harry started to argue, “You’re too —”

“I’m three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Sorcerer’s Stone.”

“Yeah, but —”
“We’re all coming,” Pearl Lais interrupted. “We joined the D.A. because we wanted to fight You-Know-Who. We joined because we wanted to make a difference. It wasn’t just for a bit of fun or a laugh.”

Hermione bit down on her lip. Cedric and Amber were one thing. They were of age, and had taken Defense and Charms at the N.E.W.T. level. Ginny, Pearl, and Luna were all fourth years. And Luna and Neville were not anywhere near the top five D.A. members Hermione would take on a deadly rescue mission.

Harry looked to Cedric for help. “You know what it’s like. Tell them to stay behind.”

Cedric glanced over the collection of students. He looked uncomfortable to be put on the spot all of a sudden. “Well — I don’t think any of us are asking to come because we’re unaware of the risk. I do know what it’s like, and I still want to stand with you. They’re all as old as you were when you faced him last year. I know if we go alone, we’ll have less of a chance.”

“That’s right,” said Luna.

“Well it doesn’t matter anyway,” said Harry. “We still don’t know how to get there —”

“I thought we’d settled that,” said Luna. “We’re flying.”

“Look,” Ron said, “you might be able to fly without a broomstick but the rest of us can’t sprout wings whenever we —”

“There are other ways of flying than with broomsticks.”

“I s’pose we’re going to ride on the back of the Kacky Snorgle or whatever it is?”

“The Crumple-Horned Snorkack can’t fly, but they can.” Luna pointed into the trees. “And Hagrid says they’re very good at finding places their riders are looking for.”

Hermione turned to where Luna pointed, but unsurprisingly saw nothing. She folded her arms over her chest, and was about to suggest they steal brooms from the Quidditch shed when Harry stepped forward. He reached his hand up like he was stroking something that was there.

“Is it those mad horse things?” asked Ron. “Those ones you can’t see unless you’ve watched someone snuff it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“How many?”

“Just two.”

“We need five,” said Hermione.

“There are... nine of us,” said Luna, turning in a circle to count everyone up.

“Don’t be stupid, we can’t all go,” said Harry. “Besides, it’s not as if we can just find more thestrals —”

“More of them will come,” Ginny said. She was confident, even though she was staring in the wrong direction.

“What makes you think that?”
“You and Hermione are covered in blood. We know Hagrid lures thestrals with raw meat, so that must be how these two turned up.”

Hermione resisted the urge to flick Grawp’s blood off of her. She did not like the idea of an invisible horse creature being attracted to her scent anymore than she liked the idea of being covered in blood, but the thestrals were probably the best way out of Hogwarts.

“Ron and I will take these two, then,” said Harry, walking over towards Ron with both hands up. Hermione could only assume his hands were guiding the thestrals. “Hermione can stay here with you guys and attract more thestrals —”

“I’m not staying behind!” she snapped at Harry, and fumbled at the air beside him until she had her hand on the thestral.

“There’s no need for anyone to stay behind,” said Luna. “Here come more now. You two must really smell.”

Harry squinted into the trees. “Alright. Pick one and get on then.”

Harry, Luna, and Neville helped guide those who could not see the thestrals to their mounts.

“This is mad,” Ron said.

Hermione was inclined to agree as she felt along the back of the thestral, making sure she was in the right place to climb onto it.

“If I could just see it…."

“You’d better hope it stays invisible,” said Harry. “We all ready then?”

“Wait, Harry,” said Cedric. He seemed unsure as he guided his thestral alongside Harry’s. “Ron said that you told Regulus Black about the vision you had?”

“Yes,” said Harry impatiently. “Why?”

“We don’t know if he’ll alert the Order. Should we stop by Headquarters and see if we can get any assistance?”

“Fine, but we can’t afford to waste time. Go with Pearl and Amber, we’ll go on to the Ministry.”

“They can’t go to Headquarters,” interrupted Hermione. “Take Ginny and Neville. They know the secret, and Neville can keep an eye on thestrals.”

“I’m not getting left behind,” Ginny snapped.

“We’ll join them as soon as we get help,” Cedric said quickly, “but I’d appreciate having you as backup with me.”

“Are we finally ready to go?” asked Harry, surveying the group.

Hermione was not particularly confident about riding to London on an invisible horse, but she said nothing.

“Great. Ministry of Magic, visitors’ entrance, London, then,” Harry said to his thestral.

There was a moment’s pause, then Hermione felt leathery wings extend beneath her. She held back
a cry and gripped the thestral’s mane tightly. The thestral crouched, pumped its wings, and lifted off into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
The Department of Mysteries

Chapter Summary

Cedric Diggory has faced death before, and will again. It never gets any easier.

Chapter Notes

Hello! It's a Friday! I love updating on Fridays. Getting to hear from you over the weekend always makes my weekend more special. I worked really hard on this chapter about my favorite boy, so I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cedric found he much preferred flying on a broom.

The invisibility of the thestrals didn’t bother him as much as he had expected; flying on a broom did not involve much looking at the broom while flying. What was more concerning was the weight of what was beneath him. He could feel the pull of powerful muscles with each pump of her wings as the thestral moved of her own accord. He was not confident she had much interest in being directed by him. He’d ridden horses before, but they had always been saddled, and they certainly hadn’t flown.

The cold night made his extremities numb, the rush of air thundered through his ears, filtering out all other sound, and the countryside was dark below him. Cedric struggled to stay focused on the task at hand. It seemed so easy to drift off into nothingness. He was hardly even aware of those around him, unless Hermione or Pearl gave a sudden shriek when their thestral lurched beneath them. He was grateful, too, for Amber’s occasional holler of delight. At least she enjoyed thestrals.

There was another yell from one of the girls, and Cedric’s thestral descended sharply. They broke through a damp layer of cloud and he could see the glittering lights of London below. It was breathtaking, but he only had a moment to enjoy it.

“Grimmauld Place — Number —” and Cedric found he could not give the appropriate address to the thestral. He was not a Secret Keeper for the Order. But his thestral didn’t seem to mind. She veered west, slightly away from Harry, and Cedric hoped Neville and Ginny would join him. Even though it did not seem possible Voldemort and his Death Eaters could know of their impulsive rescue mission, and they certainly didn’t know where the Order’s headquarters was, Cedric felt afraid to go anywhere alone.

As he descended, the speed of his thestral did not seem to decrease. Vague lights turned into solid street lamps, houses passed in a blur, and Muggle automobiles rumbled with a high-pitched whine, their engine sound distorted by the speed at which his thestral traveled. Cedric braced himself as she approached the park outside Grimmauld Place — and then all was still. His thestral had alighted without sound nor force. He felt her toss her head and he heard a soft breath as she sniffed the air for food.
Neville landed to Cedric’s left and dismounted onto trembling legs. Cedric wondered if Neville had ever even flown on a broom. He was struck by Neville’s bravery.

Cedric slid down to the ground, carefully as he could, and kept a hand on his thestral’s neck, afraid to lose her if he could no longer feel her.

Ginny was a moment more, and she dismounted quickly. “Let’s go, we should hurry,” she said, and charged forward, running right into Cedric’s thestral.

“I’ll stay out here with them,” Neville said. “They might run off to find a dumpster or something.”

Cedric headed for the door to Number 12, hands stretched out, in case he was too close to a thestral. He made it out of the park without bumping into one, and crossed the street with Ginny close on his heels. Once he was up the front steps, he hesitated before the solid black door. The bell pull would awaken all the portraits, and so would knocking. Ginny, however, had no such qualms about disturbing the house.

“What are you waiting for?” She pounded her fist against the door. They could hear Walburga Black’s shrill scream even from outside.

It was not until the shrieking portrait was quieted that Regulus Black opened the door. He stared at them in complete, well-warranted surprise.

“Cedric — Ginny? Shouldn’t you both be at Hogwarts?” Regulus glanced over their shoulders. “Is that Neville Longbottom with… what are those?”

“They’re thestrals,” Cedric said.

Ginny did not seem interested in a lengthy conversation. “Is anyone else here?”

“It’s only Kreacher and myself at the moment,” Regulus said. “Come in, please. It’s not safe to stand on this doorstep too long.” He motioned for Neville to come inside as well.

Neville hesitated by the thestrals, then hurried across the street to join them. Neville looked back over his shoulder. “I don’t want to let them run off —“

“If they are thestrals, as you say, I can send Kreacher out with some raw meat for them.” Regulus squinted out into the night. “Strange, really. Never thought I’d see one outside of a book.”

“You can see them?” Neville asked as they stepped inside.

“Oh, yes. I dare say I have seen death, having given it personally.” Regulus’s smile was grim as he closed the door. “Did you come from Hogwarts on them? Whatever for?”

“We did,” Cedric said. “Harry said he told you about his vision of Snape.”

“Yes.” Regulus led them into the parlor down the hall, where he summoned Kreacher and asked him to take some food out to the thestrals. “Honestly, Harry’s vision seemed rather ludicrous to me.”

“Harry’s sure of what he saw,” said Ginny.

“I’m sure he is. However, I am not sure that the Dark Lord could get into the Department of Mysteries undetected. I am not sure, either, that Severus Snape is in as much danger as Harry seems to think. Severus’ job is to stay out of conflict, and he is quite good at it.”
“It doesn’t matter either way,” said Cedric. “Harry’s already gone to the Ministry to try to help —”

“He has? That’s rather rash and foolish.”

“We haven’t been able to get a hold of Snape, nor anyone else in the Order. We had to get help.”

“Please,” said Neville, “will you at least come with us?”

“I don’t think that would be particularly wise. Even if Severus is in trouble, I don’t have much interest in facing The Dark Lord again.”

“You’re just scared,” said Ginny.

“As you ought to be.” Regulus sat down in one of the parlor chairs, as if emphasizing his decision to stay. “The Dark Lord and his followers are a dangerous force that should not be dealt with lightly. I think one of you knows this better than the others. Someone from the Order will come along soon, and they’ll be able to help. I’ll ask Kreacher to put on tea for all of you.”

“Would you go if it was Sirius in danger?” Ginny snapped.

“You all know my brother and I don’t —”

“But would you go? Would you go to protect him?”

Regulus didn’t answer. Ginny had no interest in staying around to wait for one.

“We’re going after Harry,” she said. “Stay if you want, but I’m not waiting around for someone else to do what needs to be done.” And she left without another word. Regulus did not try to stop her.

Neville turned to follow, then hesitated, hand still on the doorframe. “You’ll tell someone where we are and what’s happened, won’t you, Mr. Black?”

“Of course.”

And Neville followed after Ginny.

“You know you shouldn’t go after them,” said Regulus.

Cedric hesitated. He knew the trip to the Ministry was unwise. They were students, all of them. It seemed easy to sit here, to wait for someone more qualified to help. He did not know what it was in Harry that made it so easy for Harry to fight. They’d both been there in the graveyard. They both knew what it was to face Voldemort.

Cedric had put his name in the Goblet of Fire even though he was only in his sixth year. Cedric had faced the same challenges as Harry in the Triwizard Tournament. He hadn’t balked when facing a dragon. He hadn’t hesitated against the grindylows. He’d studied Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology intently, heart set on fieldwork among dangerous plants and animals. Cedric was not a coward and yet….

“Why is it so easy for them to just go?”

Regulus shrugged. “I wasted many years trying to understand the nature of foolishness. I have given up.”

But Cedric did not think that was it. His friends were not idiots. They simply had the strength to do
what was right. They were brave, and of late, Cedric had a very hard time being brave.

“You went to the graveyard to save me and Harry.”

“I went to the graveyard to finish some unresolved hurts between Barty and I. Don’t confuse vengeance with valor.”

Cedric did not feel very valiant, but he did feel loyal. He knew he could not abandon his friends when they could use his help.

“I wish you’d come with us,” said Cedric.

“Perhaps, but it is not your decision to regret.”

There was no changing Regulus’s mind then. Cedric left Grimmauld Place.

“Let’s just go,” Cedric heard Ginny snap as Neville struggled to mount his thestral.

“We can’t leave him,” said Neville. “He won’t be able to find his thestral.”

“He’s not coming. You saw his face.”

“I’m here,” Cedric said, stepping through the gates of the park. “I thought I could convince Regulus Black to join us, but I was wrong. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Your thestral’s right in front of Kreacher,” Neville said, and pointed to the space in front of the house-elf.

“Thank you for caring for her,” Cedric said to Kreacher, who only grunted irritably. He reached out a careful hand until his knuckles brushed the thestral’s neck. He searched until his fingers found her mane and, feeling fairly confident he had correctly oriented himself, mounted.

“Um, do you guys know where we’re going?” Neville asked. “My parents have never let me visit them at work.”

Ginny hesitated. “Dad’s always Apparated into the Ministry directly, and if Mum takes us, it’s in the Floo.”

Amos Diggory had given Cedric a tour of the Ministry after his O.W.L. results had come, when they were both confident Cedric was going to continue in a career related to Magical Beasts. They’d used the official entrance then, but that required a Ministry of Magic official coin.

“My Mum took me through the visitor’s entrance once,” Cedric said. “I was maybe ten… so I’m not sure I remember, but we can start there.”

“Ministry of Magic, visitor’s entrance, then,” Ginny said to her thestral, and it took off into the sky.

This trip was far shorter. It seemed to Cedric that his thestral simply went up several hundred feet, then shot down to the ground immediately. He was amazed they’d traveled any distance at all, but they were now in a dark, back alley of London, rather than the pleasant park in the middle of Grimmauld Place.

Ginny was the first to dismount and she looked around the dirty alley. She did not seem off-put nor confused by its appearance. Neville, though he readily dismounted, cast a wary eye around the alley, and already had his wand out.
“Where’s the entrance?” Ginny kicked her foot against the dumpster, like it might reveal something.

“Are we sure this is right?” asked Neville.

“Yes, this is it,” said Cedric. He slid off his thestral and opened the door of the telephone booth.

“I can’t imagine all six of them fit in here,” Neville said, squeezing in next to Ginny.

“Well now what?” Ginny asked impatiently.

Cedric edged around Ginny to look at the numbers on the telephone. “There’s a passcode. I’m not sure I remember it.”

“Try ‘ministry’ or ‘magic.’” Neville suggested.

“There’s only numbers,” Cedric said.

Ginny squeezed herself between him and the telephone receiver. “Let me. Muggles have a letter code associated with numbers.”

“Do they really? Would the Ministry —”

But Ginny wasn’t listening to Cedric. She had already lifted the phone from the receiver and was turning the dial.

“Where did you learn this?” Cedric asked, watching as Ginny entered, “64647879.” Nothing happened, and Ginny hung up the telephone and tried a different code.

“Muggle Studies,” she said. “Older telephones don’t have the letters, but on modern ones —”

She was interrupted by a woman’s voice coming not from the telephone, but from the booth itself. “Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

Ginny and Neville looked to Cedric.

“Er — Cedric Diggory, Ginny Weasley, and Neville Longbottom. We’re here to… rescue Professor Snape?”

“Thank you,” the voice said. “Visitors, please take your badges and attach them to the front of your robes.”

From the tray at the bottom of the phone receiver slid three square, silver pins. On the pins were printed each of their names, and “Rescue Mission.”

“Visitors to the Ministry,” the female voice continued, “you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium.”

And with a small shudder, the telephone box began to slide down into the ground, taking the three students with it.

“What was the passcode?” Neville whispered to Ginny, like he was afraid the female voice might hear him and know they had cheated their way in.

“Six, two, four, four, two,” Ginny said. “‘Magic,’ just like you suggested.”
As the dark and dirty alley disappeared from view, a small golden light appeared beneath their feet, then expanded to fill the whole of the telephone box. The view from their windows began to change from a deep black into a dim view of the Atrium.

Cedric had hoped Harry and the others might be here, but he supposed the trip to Grimmauld Place had delayed his party by a few minutes. He took a moment, as he always had, to be awed by the high ceilings of the Ministry, coated in lapis lazuli with shifting gold runes moving lazily above them.

“Now what?” Ginny asked.

The Atrium was entirely empty. There was no security at the golden gates, waiting to check their wands. The fires that lit the Atrium were out, and none of the Floo entrances were burning. The only sound was the echo of running water from the golden fountain of the wizard, witch, goblin, house-elf, and centaur. Cedric was not even sure what was providing the dim light that illuminated the Atrium.

“Harry said he saw Snape in the Department of Mysteries,” Neville said. “I don’t know where that is, though.”

“Downstairs,” Cedric said. “If Harry and the rest are there, though, we may never find them.”

“What does that mean?” Neville asked.

Ginny was already tearing off for the lift at the other end of the Atrium, and Cedric and Neville had to jog to keep up.

“The Department of Mysteries is top secret.” Cedric explained. “It’s designed to confuse anyone who isn’t authorized to work there. Dad took me down once, and we just sort of looked at it and left. I don’t know how far Harry will even be able to get.”

They reached the golden gates of the lift and the thundering of metal scraping against metal filled the Atrium. It was loud, and Cedric turned quickly, waiting for security to appear and stop them.

No one came.

“It is odd, isn’t it?” asked Neville. “Shouldn’t… someone be here?”

Ginny stepped into the lift before the gate had even finished opening. “Not if Voldemort killed them.”

Cedric felt a shiver run down his back, and he was suddenly as cold and numb as he had been on the back of that thestral as they’d flown across the country. His stomach turned violently, and he almost turned back.

“Let’s go.” Ginny already had her finger hovering over the button for the ninth floor.

He did not know how she could be so matter-of-fact about Voldemort murdering Ministry employees and still be so ready to charge into battle. But he did know that he was the only one who had even the slimmest chance of guiding them through the Department of Mysteries.

Cedric stepped into the lift and used the brief descent to steel his nerves. He was not sure he was very successful. His stomach still twisted as they exited into a dark corridor, and the same voice from the elevator announced, “Department of Mysteries.”
“This way,” Cedric said, leading them down the black marble corridor.

Though Ginny was not the one who knew where they were going, she kept pace beside Cedric. “This looks like the hallway Harry described the night my dad was attacked,” she said.

“Then shouldn’t someone from the Order be here on guard?” Neville tightened his grip on his wand.

Though Ginny did not suggest anything awful had happened, Cedric thought it anyway. He wondered who was supposed to be here. Surely this was the door the Order had been guarding all year. Why would they leave their post now?

Perhaps, whoever it was, Harry had already met them, and they had joined Harry in the journey to rescue Snape. Cedric desperately hoped that was the case.

They reached the solid black door at the end of the tunnel. Cedric was about to ask how to open it — like Grimmauld Place, it had no doorknob nor any clasp nor handle — but Ginny simply stepped toward it and it swung open. Cedric thought surely the Department of Mysteries should have additional security. Hadn’t Podmore been arrested for simply trying to get through this door? But as soon as the door swung open his thoughts were derailed by Amber Lais’s shout.

“You made it!”

Cedric followed Ginny into a round room, walls and doors as black as the hallway they had just come through. But in here, the candles were blue, and they cast an eerie reflection off of the dark marble, contrasting with an orange glow from the hallway behind Cedric, and a similar glow from one of the doors to his left. Not only was Amber here, but Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Pearl were all in here too.

“No one’s come with you?” Ron asked. He looked disappointed.

“No one was there but Regulus,” Ginny said, and it was hard to miss the acid in her voice. “He refused.”

“He at least promised he’d tell whoever arrived at headquarters first to come help us,” Neville said as he stepped into the room.

“Wait, Neville,” Hermione said, “don’t close —”

But it was too late. Neville had closed the door behind them. The yellow light behind them was extinguished, and Cedric was reminded, for a moment, of swimming in the depths of the Black Lake. Then the candles began to move, and the entire wall turned, rotating until there was nothing but a spinning ring of blue light and a bright gold band beneath it. Cedric was glad that Ginny was still standing near him, because his stomach turned so badly that he had to put a hand on her shoulder to stay steady.

Finally, the walls slowed, and the candles stilled, and they were standing in a room with a dozen identical black marble doors. There was no way to tell where they had come from and where they had to go.

“Sorry,” Neville said quietly.

“At least we’ve still got that first door marked,” Ron said, pointing to a door behind Cedric.

Cedric turned and saw what had created that golden band. One of the doors was marked with a
fiery “X” that still burned on its surface.

“That’s one you already opened?” Ginny asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“It was full of brains,” Ron said, and shivered. “Weird.”

“This whole place is weird,” Pearl Lais said. “We need to find the right door quickly.”

“Let’s try this one,” Harry suggested, hand on a handle.

“Wait —” Hermione put her hand on his. “There’s nine of us, and over a dozen doors. This could take us forever. Let’s each take one, increase our odds of finding the right door.”

Amber and Ginny had already grabbed a door each before Hermione was finished speaking.

“Tell us what we’re looking for, Harry,” Amber said.

“Er — it kind of glitters. There’s a… clicking noise.”

Cedric did not find Harry’s description particularly helpful, but he put his hand on a door handle all the same.

Once everyone had taken a door, Harry counted them down.

“Okay, everyone open on one, two, three!”

Cedric pulled on his door. He was greeted with the same hallway he had just come through. The warm orange torches looked inviting compared to the blue candles, despite the same cold black marble on the other side. Perhaps he should encourage everyone to leave, to wait for help to arrive.

“I’ve got a… golden fountain?” Hermione said. “No — it’s black. Now it’s… oh, it doesn’t matter! There’s certainly no ticking. Flagrante! Remember, no one close your door until I’ve come to mark it.”

“Hurry up on mine!” Ginny shouted. There was a roar that nearly drowned out her voice. “I’m not sure if it’s a cyclone or a thunderstorm or a volcano or all of it but it might come out —” There was a thud as they closed her door and Hermione marked it.

“Thanks,” Ginny said. “What’ve you got, Harry?”

While Ginny went to inspect Harry’s door, Hermione reached Cedric.

“I think it’s the way out,” Cedric said.

“Good,” said Hermione. “We can mark it differently.” And she made sure to make her fire a circle.

“How long will those last?” Cedric reluctantly closed the door.

“Hopefully long enough,” Hermione said.

“My room looks huge,” Neville said. “Oh — It’s almost like it’s pulling me in. Uh — Hermione — Ron —”

Cedric ran and grabbed Neville’s arm. He, too, could feel the weight pulling him in, as if his body
was far heavier than he was used to. He planted one foot against the wall and pulled away, but it was all he could do to hold Neville in place. Then the orange and white swirling storms that blocked the door swept aside and the weight was gone. The room was black and glittering, like looking up at the night sky, and Cedric could see now that the storms had just part of a replica of Jupiter, passing by as copies of each planet rotated around the room.

Hermione closed the door, and Cedric could see nothing more than her fiery “X.”

“Mine’s locked,” Amber grunted. “Someone help me with it.”

Hermione put an “X” through Amber’s door. “Harry could get through all the doors in his dream, so if it’s locked, it can’t be the one we need. Harry, we — Harry, where did you go?”

Cedric looked around the room and saw that not only was Harry missing, but Luna, and Ginny had vanished as well. There were two doors, open and unmarked, with no one waiting for Hermione to close their doors.

“You said ticking, yeah?” called Ron. “I think I’ve got the right door here.”

“Harry!” Hermione half-shouted, afraid to raise her voice too high. “Harry, where did you go?”

“You and Neville look for him in that one,” Cedric pointed at one of the empty open doors. “I’ll check this one. Amber, go mark off Pearl’s door. Ron, just wait until we get everyone back together.”

Everyone followed Cedric’s instructions without question. It surprised him, a little, both that he made the decision so quickly, and that the others listened so easily.

The door Cedric approached did not emit much light. He stepped into a very dim room, and saw that the center of the room was actually about twenty feet down. The surrounding walls were filled with benches and steep steps descended down into the middle. In the center, upon a dias, stood a lone gray arch. Cracks ran through it and bits of the stone seemed like they could crumble away at any moment. From its peak hung a thin, tattered black cloth. It fluttered slowly, back and forth, though Cedric could feel no wind in the room. It was strangely beautiful, peaceful in a way.

Harry stood at the bottom, circling to the other side of the arch, and Ginny was climbing down to meet him.

“What did you find?” Cedric asked, as loudly as he dared. His voice echoed in the round stone room, and when it had faded, Cedric could hear whispers that did not sound like Ginny or Harry.

Cedric carefully made his way down the steep stone steps to the floor below.

Ginny did not react as Cedric reached her. She continued staring at the arch, entranced. The whispers were certainly louder here — or perhaps not louder, perhaps just concentrated.

“Harry, are you there?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah.” Harry sounded distracted, but his voice clearly came from the other side of the arch. It did not seem to pass through the veil.

Cedric climbed onto the dias and stretched his hand out to the veil. His fingers felt cold, numb, and fear gripped him in a way he had not felt since he had heard Barty Crouch issue the Killing Curse and watched a bright green light flash before his eyes.
It was a strange sensation, to know you were about to die. Though it took hardly a second for the curse to be cast, Cedric remembered it as if it had been minutes long, like a Muggle moving picture that had been slowed down, frame by frame.

Cedric pulled his hand away from the veil. As certain as he was of being alive now, he knew that it would mean death to walk through this arch. Whether it was magic or a biological impulse, he did not know nor care. His body knew what this was, and it terrified him.

“We should go,” he said, though his voice was not much more than a whisper. Hard as it was to tear his eyes from the veil, he turned away and took Ginny’s arm. She continued to stare up at the arch, but Cedric pulled her towards the steps.

“Harry,” he called, voice a little stronger.

“Yeah.” Harry’s voice still sounded distant, even as he came around the dias.

“Harry, we need to go.”

Harry flinched and his hand flew to his scar. It was as if the pain snapped him from whatever power the arch held, as Cedric’s fear had done for him.

“Right — Snape —” Harry flinched again and followed Cedric up the steps. He helped Ginny when she stumbled, as if she still couldn’t tear herself from the veil.

A shadow appeared in the flickering torchlight at the door, and Cedric recognized Amber’s bulky frame.

“Ced? You alright?”

Cedric helped Ginny through the door and let Harry pass before he stepped out.

“I’m alright,” he said.

Though Amber didn’t look like she believed him, Cedric was not sure he had been so honest about it all year. Cedric marked the door with a fiery “X” and shut it behind him.

Hermione did the same to a door just across the way. She looked frustrated, but Cedric guessed that had more to do with Luna, who was still talking excitedly about what she had seen. Cedric did not know how much truth was in her colorful description — and it truly was colorful; she continued on about rainbows and shapes, trees and flowers, but she stopped talking as they all gathered around Ron’s door.

“This is it!” said Harry, and stepped through.

Cedric again waited for everyone to get through the door safely and closed it behind them.

This new room was wholly different from the two Cedric had seen so far. This one actually looked like an office, or a place of study, for the most part. Desks lined the room, each one decorated with clocks, pendulums, and sand timers. In fact, the entire room was covered in clocks, large and small. Desk-sized clocks operated as bookends on the shelves, and grandfather clocks stood proudly, bookending the bookshelves that lined the walls. Large clock faces served as false-windows, casting a warm yellow and white glow across the room, marred only by the shadows of clock hands. The ticking noise Harry had described came from all around, from the clocks in the windows and the bookshelves, and the desks — it was not deafening, but it was overwhelming.
At the very end of the hall, where Harry was leading them, sat a bell jar not much shorter than a full-grown man. It glowed brilliantly, and the sand inside glittered as it swirled, as if an unnatural wind kept it from falling through the glass as it should. As they grew closer, Cedric saw the glow inside was actually from an egg, coated in jewels and glistening brightly.

“Look,” Ginny breathed, and pointed, as the egg lifted from the base of the jar and cracked open.

A baby hummingbird, wet and scrawny emerged and continued ascending. As it rose, it grew into an adult, as glittered and jeweled as its egg. It reached the very top of the jar, wings beating too fast to be seen, and then it descended, returned to its infant state, then back into its egg, as if the egg had never hatched.

“It’s through here;” Harry said, hand on a door just behind this last desk.

Cedric turned away from the bell jar reluctantly. It had been a beautiful progression, and he felt he could have watched it all over again, but Harry’s voice was urgent, and the ticking clocks reminded them all of the danger they were risking by lingering.

Harry pushed on the door and Cedric tightened his grip on his wand.

This room was far more dimly lit than the last, and Cedric did not think it felt anything like a workplace or a place of study. The ceilings were high, like a cathedral, and the room was filled with only shelves. It was not unlike a library, he thought, but instead of books, the shelves were filled with glass spheres, all coated in varying layers of dust. Each sphere flickered with a dancing blue light, from some flame at their center, but there was absolutely no warmth to this vast room. The shelves stretched through both sides, and disappeared into the darkness. There was no way to tell just how large this room truly was.


“The what?” asked Hermione.

“Trelawney told us about it last year. It was our first N.E.W.T. lesson. Every prophecy given in the history of wizardry is recorded here.”

It was no wonder the size of this place was so overwhelming.

“Keep your wands out.” Harry’s voice was tight. Cedric wanted to ask if the Hall of Prophecies meant something to Harry, but he was afraid to speak too loudly.

“Where are we headed?” Ron whispered.

“Row ninety-seven,” Harry answered.

Hermione stepped closer to the shelves. “This is fifty-three, and to our right…. Yes, that’s fifty-four.”

As they drew closer, Cedric got a clearer look at the silver numbers labeling the shelves. They were disjointed in style, like each shelf had been added by a different witch or wizard. He wondered how many years spanned between shelves. He could not even wager a guess at how many orbs rested on each shelf, untouched for so many years.

Pearl drew close to Luna and whispered, “Why would You-Know-Who bring Professor Snape here?”
“Perhaps he wants a prophecy,” Luna said.

Cedric felt many half-formed thoughts from the year reach their conclusion: The Order had been guarding a door, the door to the Department of Mysteries, the door that eventually led here, to this Hall of Prophecies. The weapon Voldemort had been after was not a weapon after all, it was insight into the future. It was a prophecy.

“Amber,” Cedric spoke in a breathless whisper, “if You-Know-Who wanted a prophecy, other than the Department’s security, what would stop him from getting it?”

“It would have to be about him,” Amber said. She gestured to shelf eighty-five as they passed it. Cedric could see tiny labels with tight scripts attached to the glass orbs. “You can’t pick any of these up unless they’re yours.”

Cedric felt as though his uneasy stomach had solidified into lead. “Harry —”

Hermione stopped them at row ninety-seven. “Here,” she said.

They gathered around the end, but Cedric did not see a sign of anyone in the row between the glowing shelves.

“Harry,” Cedric tried again.

“He’s at the end,” Harry said, “we just can’t see properly from here.” Harry charged forward.

“Wait,” said Cedric, but he was not about to let Harry press on alone. He followed close at Harry’s heels. “Harry, wait, this doesn’t —”

“No, Snape has to be here,” Harry said, but as they continued walking, it became clear there was no sign of a person, tortured or otherwise.

They slowed, then stopped, shelves spreading endlessly in each direction, rows of orbs glowing as far as they could see.

“I don’t think he’s here,” Hermione whispered.

“But this is what I saw,” Harry said. “I’m sure this is what I saw.”

Cedric was afraid to give voice to the understanding he had just reached, and before he could quite find the courage, Ron spoke up.

“Harry?”

“What?” Harry snapped.

“Have you seen this?”

Harry turned quickly, and so did Cedric, but Ron was not pointing to any sign of Snape. He was pointing to one of the clouded blue orbs.

“It’s got your name on it,” said Ron.

“My name?” Harry frowned. He walked over to Ron and read the label on the sphere.

“Do you know what it is?” Ron asked.
“I think I do.”

“Harry — don’t,” said Neville.

“Why not?” Harry asked. “It’s about me.” He reached for the sphere.

“Harry, I don’t think you should touch it.”

“It’s just a prophecy,” Harry said.

“But Harry’s hand had already closed around the orb. He pulled it down from the shelf.

Nothing happened. No prophecy burst forth, nothing rose out of the orb as Harry wiped the thick layers of dust from the glass.

Then, in a drawling voice that sent chills down Cedric’s spine, a voice Cedric hadn’t heard since that night in the graveyard, someone said, “Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated!
Chapter Summary

Harry and his friends must survive in a duel where they are outnumbered and outmatched.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the wait. This chapter was not supposed to take this long. My beta ageofzero and I have each been going through some time-consuming life events -- new homes, new jobs, lots of boxes, lots of moving, some weddings -- everything is just a lot. This book was supposed to be done in time for my cousin's wedding last week. She's been an avid reader of this series and I'm so sad I didn't get it done in time. In my defense, I was busy with her wedding!

I have just one scene of this book left to write, a scene that's been in my notes for years, so with any luck I will have that done soon, and we'll be able to finish this book out with weekly updates! I'm so excited for this finale. I've been working on it for actual years and I can't wait to share all of it with you.

From all around them, figures in dark cloaks and masks stepped into the dimly lit corridor. They seemed to appear out of thin air, and Harry wondered how long they had been hiding, watching, waiting for him to reach up and grab this very prophecy. Cedric had been trying to warn him, and Harry hadn't listened. He'd been too wrapped up in finally hearing the prophecy that had been given about him, the prophecy that had sent his parents into hiding, the prophecy that had sent Snape from Voldemort to Dumbledore.

“‘To me, Potter,’” Lucius Malfoy said once more, and extended his hand for the prophecy. Though he was cloaked and wore a dark hood over his face, his drawling voice was as unmistakable as it had been in the graveyard.

Harry pulled the orb closer to his chest. “Where’s Snape?”

There was laughter from the group of thirteen Death Eaters, a few even edged in closer, wands out. Harry felt his own group of friends tighten in around him.

“The Dark Lord always knows!” a woman’s voice shouted. She continued laughing, even though the others no longer were.

“Always,” Malfoy said, and Harry could hear the smug smile on his lips. “Now give me the prophecy, Potter!”

“Tell us what you’ve done with Snape!”

The woman laughed again and stepped forward until she was side by side with Malfoy. “The wittle
Amber and Ron, on either side of Harry, started to raise their wands.

“Wait,” Harry muttered, “Not yet —” They were nine students against thirteen dark wizards. They had to be smart about this.

The woman laughed once more, a high, shrill, mad laugh. “You hear him? You hear him? Giving instructions to the other children as though he thinks of fighting us!”

“Oh, you don’t know Potter as I do,” Malfoy said. “He has a great weakness for heroics; the Dark Lord understands this about him. Now, the prophecy, Potter.”

Harry tightened his grip on the glass ball. So Snape wasn’t here. Voldemort had given him a vision of Snape, lured Harry here, like Hermione had suggested. But Harry had checked. They’d checked the school, and they’d checked Headquarters. Voldemort had to have him.

“If Snape’s not here, where is he?” Harry asked.

“Severus has been sufficiently occupied for the day,” Malfoy said. “Now, give me the prophecy, or we start using wands.”

“Go on then.” Harry leveled his wand at Malfoy and held the prophecy aloft in the other. His friends, too, raised their wands. It was not the smart strategy Harry had hoped to come up with, but they were cornered. If this was it….

But Malfoy and the others did not attack.

Again, Malfoy said, “Hand over the prophecy and no one need get hurt.”

For the first time, Harry felt like he might have the upper hand if he could do this right. He laughed. “Yeah, right, I give you this prophecy and you’ll just let us skip off home, will you?”

The woman said, “Accio Prophecy—”

“Protego!” Harry shouted. The prophecy in his hand was pulled to his fingertips, but as her spell collided with his shield, he closed his hand around the glass orb.

“Oh,” her voice broke into another laugh. “He knows how to play, little bitty baby Potter. Very well, then —”

“I told you, no!” Lucius said, reaching out to stop her. “If you smash it —”

She ignored him with a wave of her hand, then she pulled off her hood.

Harry did not need an introduction. Even if he hadn’t he seen her face in Dumbledore’s memories, the Daily Prophet, and plastered all over Hogsmeade, Harry would have recognized her. She had the same sharp cheekbones as Sirius, and the same deadly sneer as her sister. Her expression, though, unlike Narcissa Black’s reserved demeanor, was wild and excitable.

“You need more persuasion?” Bellatrix Lestrange said. “Very well —” She waved her wand from the Death Eater on her left to Ginny. “Take the smallest one. We’ll let him watch while we torture the little girl. I’ll do it.”

The group closed around Ginny. Harry stepped in front of her and held the prophecy at chest
height. He had already watched, helpless, as one friend was tortured by Voldemort last year; he was not about to let it happen again.

“You’ll have to smash this prophecy if you want to attack any of us. I don’t think Voldemort will be too pleased —”

“You dare speak his name?” Bellatrix hissed.

“Yeah.” Harry tightened his grip on the glass sphere and prepared to cast another Shield Charm. “I’ve got no problem saying Voldemort —”

“Shut your mouth! You dare speak his name with your unworthy lips, you dare besmirch it with your half-blood’s tongue, you dare —”

Harry’s anger rose as she insulted his family. “Did you know he’s a half-blood too?” Hermione grabbed his robes, trying to stop him, but Harry was not interested in cowing before anyone who insulted his family. “Yeah, his mum was a witch but his dad was a Muggle — or has he been telling you lot he’s pureblooded?”

“Stupe —”

“No!” Malfoy grabbed Bellatrix and her jinx went wide. The red spark hit a shelf just to the left of Harry’s shoulder. The glass orbs tumbled to the marble floor and shattered. The pale blue smoke and flame inside unfurled, following the shards of glass for a moment, then rose upwards. They took the shape of the Seers who had given them, issuing their portents. In the discordance of voices, Harry could only catch pieces of the prophecies.

“At the Solstice will come a new…”

“Do not attack! We need the prophecy!”

“... the dark of the moon and the slaughtered lamb….

“He dares — he dares —”

“... and none will come after….”

“Wait until we’ve got the prophecy!”

And then the various, smoky figures and their words were gone. The flames burned out, the smoke dissipated, and the only proof left of their existence was the shattered glass on the floor.

It gave Harry an idea, but he needed the right moment.

“You haven’t told me what’s so special about this prophecy I’m supposed to be handing over.” As Harry spoke, he nudged his foot backwards, searching for the nearest person.

“Don’t play games with us, Potter,” said Malfoy.

“I’m not playing games.” Harry found a foot and stepped on it. Hermione hissed behind him.

“What?” She was barely audible.

“Dumbledore never told you that the reason you bear that scar was hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries?”
“No.” Harry was only half-listening. He already knew the prophecy was why his parents went into hiding, so it must have been connected to the night Voldemort attacked. Malfoy wasn’t telling him anything new. Harry’s mind was focused on getting himself and his friends out of here alive.

“Smash shelves,” he hissed as Malfoy continued, “when I say go —”

“Well, well, this explains why you didn’t come earlier, Potter. The Dark Lord wondered why you didn’t come running when he showed you the place where it was hidden in your dreams. He thought natural curiosity would make you want to hear the exact wording.”

Harry was curious, Malfoy wasn’t wrong about that, but he wasn’t sure that even knowing there was a mysterious prophecy would have sent him running to the Ministry of Magic. Voldemort must think him particularly reckless.

“Why would he want to steal a prophecy about me?” Harry asked.

“About both of you, Potter, about both of you. Haven’t you ever wondered why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby?”

Harry knew his parents had fought Voldemort, that Voldemort was evil. Yes, he wanted to know this prophecy. He wanted to know why his parents so rarely talked about that night all those years ago. They’d survived, but they never told him why they’d had to hide in the first place. If it was all tied up in this prophecy, then of course he wanted to know.

But Harry would rather ask his parents than Lucius Malfoy. In order to do that, he had to get out of the Ministry of Magic.

“Someone… made a prophecy about me and Voldemort?” he asked in a quiet voice. “And he needed me to come and get it….”

“Yes, Potter, you’re catching on. Good.” Malfoy stepped forward, wand lowered to his side. “Now, the Dark Lord knows you, too, must —”

“Now!” Harry shouted, and all eight of his friends shouted, “Reducto!”

Curses hit the shelves all around them. Shelves toppled and glass spheres shattered. The aisle filled with smoke and voices issuing prophecies. Vision was clouded; footsteps were muffled. It was their only chance to get out.

Harry turned towards the end of the aisle and felt someone right in front of him. He pushed them forward. “Run!”

Harry broke into a sprint. When they were through the worst of the smoke, he saw Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Pearl running ahead of him. Someone grabbed his arm, yanking him backwards —

“Stupefy!” Cedric shouted, and the hand was gone.

Harry followed Hermione, fast as he could. She threw curses behind them, shattering shelves and clouding their escape. Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw Amber and Cedric alternating between ushering Neville along and throwing jinxes into the smoke. Harry was sure they could have overtaken Neville at any point, but they seemed determined to bring up the rear. He was at once grateful that his friends were putting themselves in the most dangerous position to protect others and ashamed he hadn’t done it first. This mess was because of him, after all.

At the end of the aisle the group turned right, and sprinted for the door they had come through. He
could see the glittering, shifting light of the large bell jar. They just had to get through the door and seal it.

Hermione urged Neville to hurry up. They ran past aisle fifty-six… fifty-four… fifty-three…

Harry slid through the open door. Hermione was next, then Neville, then Amber and Cedric.

Harry slammed the door shut, and Hermione said “Colloportus!” There was a noise like a rubber suction and a red glow around the door.

“Where’s Pearl? The others?” Amber asked. She held her hand to a stitch in her side as she looked around the room.

Harry did not see Ron, Luna, Ginny, nor Pearl anywhere in the room. “They were ahead of us, weren’t they?”

“They must have gone the wrong way.” Hermione looked terrified, and for a moment, Harry thought she would undo her sealing charm and try to look for them.

Neville stopped her. “Sh — Listen.”

There were footsteps outside the door. Harry pressed his ear against it and heard Malfoy issuing orders.

“Leave Nott — leave him, I say! The Dark Lord will not care for Nott’s injuries as much as losing that prophecy. Jugson, come back here, we need to organize! We’ll split into pairs and search. Don’t forget, be gentle with Potter until we’ve got the prophecy, but you can kill the others if necessary. Bellatrix, Rodolphus, you take the left. Crabbe, Rabastan, go right. Jugson, Dolohov, the door straight ahead — Macnair and Avery, through here — Rookwood, there, with Pyrites — and Mulciber, with me.”

Hermione was shaking. Harry wondered if she’d be steady enough to cast a spell at all.

“What do we do?” she whispered.

“We don’t stand here waiting for them to find us, for a start,” said Harry.

“We need to find the others,” Amber said, “before they do.”

“Let’s get away from this door,” said Cedric.

They slipped past the bell jar towards the exit at the end. Harry could still see the glowing blue lights of torches through the open door. He hoped Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Pearl would make their way there.

Harry passed the last of the desks and was nearly to the door when there was a thud against the door Hermione had charmed shut.

“Stand aside!” a rough voice said. “Alohomora!”

Harry made it halfway under a desk as the door flew open. He crouched, listening, wand at the ready.

“They might’ve run straight through to the hall,” one said.

“Check under the desks,” said the other.
Before Harry could get a good look at them, he heard Cedric shout, “Stupefy!”

There was a thud and a crash of glass. Harry looked out from under the desk and saw one of the Death Eaters had collided with a grandfather clock. The other, it seemed, had dodged the jinx and pointed his wand at Cedric.

“Avada —”

Harry launched himself forward and tackled the Death Eater. The green spark flew over Cedric and struck a desk lamp instead.

“Expelliarmus!” Neville shouted, and the Death Eater’s wand flew from his hand, landing back by the door the Death Eater’s had burst their way through. So did Harry’s.

Harry took off running for his wand, just behind the Death Eater.

“Get out the way, Harry!” Neville yelled again.

Harry had no interest in being a repeat casualty. He ducked behind a desk as Neville shouted, “Stupefy!”

But Neville missed, and the red spark struck a glass cabinet over the Death Eater’s shoulder. The glass shattered, fell to the ground, then returned to its frame as if Neville had never touched it. Then it broke again, fell to the floor, and once more repaired itself.

The Death Eater grabbed his wand and ripped off his mask to clear his line of sight. He searched wildly for a target, then said, “Stup —”

But Amber and Hermione were faster. Both shouted, “Stupefy!” and their twin red lights struck the man in the chest. He fell backwards, into the bell jar, and through the glass as if it were an open window. His head landed in the glittering dust cloud and began to change. It grew wrinkled, withered, and grey, and then it it began to shift back into his original face, hair dark, beard thick, and then his hair faded all together, his head shrunk, and became a baby’s, smooth, round. Then his head began to grow old, repeating the cycle.

“Oh,” said Hermione. “It’s time. The jar is… time.”

Harry very carefully edged his way around the bell jar and retrieved his wand while Amber helped Cedric to his feet. Cedric’s wand trembled in his hand. When he caught Harry’s eye, he composed himself, but Harry did not blame him for being afraid. Harry had only survived the Killing Curse once, as an infant. Cedric had now narrowly escaped death twice.

But before Harry could find the words to reassure Cedric, there was a shout and a crash from another room in the Department of Mysteries. Someone screamed.

“Pearl!” Amber shouted at the same time Harry shouted, “Ron!”

“Sh!” Cedric hissed, but then Hermione screamed.

“Harry!” she pointed at the glass jar.

The Death Eater had sat up, head pulled from the bell jar. A smooth, round baby’s head sat atop a burly body. The baby head wailed, and his enormous arms flailed about.

Cedric yanked Amber out of the way as the baby-man ran past them.
Harry aimed his wand, but Hermione grabbed him.

“You can’t hurt a baby!”

Harry did not think it mattered, but they did not have time to argue. Footsteps were now approaching from the Hall of Prophecy, and Harry belatedly realized he and Amber had announced quite loudly where they were hiding.

“Come on!” Neville said, and started for the exit. They should never have stalled in the first place.

“Shit,” Amber said suddenly.

Harry was already halfway to the door before he saw what she saw. Two more Death Eaters were crossing the circular room and running towards them.

“This way,” Harry said, and ducked through a door to their left.

It was a small, cluttered office, and as Hermione closed the door behind Cedric and Neville, Harry’s heart sank into his stomach. They hadn’t escaped — they were trapped.

“Collo —” but Hermione was cut off when the door flung open.

The two Death Eaters who burst their way into the room shouted, “Impedimenta!” just as Cedric shouted, “Protego!” His Shield Charm, unfortunately, was not enough to cover all of them.

Harry was thrown backwards into a stone wall. Neville and Amber were flung into the desk and toppled to the other side. Hermione hit a bookcase and heavy tomes thudded down onto her head and shoulders. Only Cedric managed to stay on his feet as he stumbled backwards, his shield absorbing the worst of the blow.

“We’ve got him!” yelled one of the Death Eaters. “In an office off —”

Cedric moved to tackle him as Hermione shouted, “Silencio!”

Cedric and the Death Eater fell into a silent tussle, any grunts or curses muted by Hermione’s spell. Cedric managed to rip off the Death Eater’s mask and Harry recognized the man from his portrait in the Daily Prophet, and the description that had been written underneath it. Antonin Dolohov, convicted of dismembering and disfiguring Fabian and Gideon Prewett.

The second Death Eater, still masked, stepped forward, and before he could issue a curse, Harry shouted, “Petrificus Totalus!”

The Death Eaters arms snapped to his sides and he fell face down in front of Harry. He did not move.

“Well done, Ha —”

Hermione was cut short by Dolohov, who had untangled himself from Cedric and threw a purple flame at Hermione. As the streak of fire passed through Hermione, she let out a soft, “oh” and fell to the ground.

“Hermione!” Harry rushed to her side, panic ringing in his ears and head throbbing. He looked around for help, but Cedric was lying motionless where he had wrestled the Death Eater. Amber had not emerged from behind the desk. Neville, however, did, crawling towards Hermione with his wand out.
Dolohov did not even lift his wand. He kicked Neville in the face, and his heel came down on Neville’s wand. There was a crack and a spark as it snapped in two. Dolohov kicked Neville again and Neville howled and collapsed as his nose cracked. Blood streamed from his face into his hands and he hastily retreated back to the safety of the desk.

Dolohov sneered at Harry. Though he could not speak, he motioned to Harry, then himself, then Hermione. Then he pointed at the prophecy.

Harry understood. “Give me the prophecy or you’ll get the same as her.”

Harry hoped desperately for Amber to appear and curse Dolohov, or Cedric or Hermione to wake up. Hermione….

His wand trembled in his hand. He tried to sound brave. “Like you won’t kill all of us the moment I hand it over anyway!”

“Waddeber you do, Harry,” said Neville, “don’t gib it to him!”

Fortunately, Harry did not have to decide. There was a crash and Dolohov turned towards the sound. The baby-headed Death Eater flailed into the room, still crying uncontrollably, still in complete distress and confusion and unable to comprehend what was happening, or even move such a large body properly.

Dolohov turning to look was everything Harry needed.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Dolohov went stiff as a board and collapsed onto the other Death Eater. Harry considered Petrifying the baby-headed Death Eater as well, if only to put him out of his misery, but before he could, the baby-man blundered out of the room.

Harry did not know how long a reprieve they would have, nor if anyone had heard Dolohov’s shout. Quickly, he put his hand over Hermione’s nose and mouth. It felt wet and warm. Good, she was breathing. He checked her pulse on her wrist. It was erratic, unsteady, but it was there. She was alive.

Harry felt relief wash over him unlike anything he had ever felt. His eyes drifted over to Cedric, and he could see Cedric’s chest rising and falling.

“Neville?”

Neville crawled out from under the desk and dragged Amber with him. Harry could see the large purple bruise on her forehead swelling into a knot. She groaned as Neville moved her.

“Abber,” Neville said, trying to rouse her.

She sat up, slowly. She pressed her hand to her head then winced and pulled it away. She blinked and looked around. “Shit, I missed it all.”

“Ib Herbime alrib?” Neville asked Harry.

“She’s alive,” said Harry.

“She’s alive,” said Harry.

“She’s alive,” said Harry.

“Ced?” Amber asked. She moved and shook him gently.

Cedric rolled over. He pushed himself up onto his knees. Blood trickled from his mouth and he
opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He shook his head and gave a thumbs up.

Everyone was alive. They weren’t alright, but they were alive. Harry could only hope Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Pearl were doing at least as well.

Harry went to the door as Amber and Neville lifted Hermione. He listened for any sign of activity, but it seemed that it was only the baby-headed Death Eater, still struggling to understand what had happened to him.

“We’re not far from the exit,” Harry whispered to the others. “If we can just get to that circular room and find the right door before the Death Eaters come, you guys can get Hermione into the lift, find someone and raise the alarm.”

“Ab whad are you going to do?” Neville asked with a frown.

“I’ve got to find the others.”

“Well, I’b going to find dem wid you.”

“And I’m not leaving without Pearl,” said Amber.

Cedric shook his head. He pointed at Hermione and the exit. He also waved his wand at Neville.

“Cedric’s right,” said Harry. “We need to get Hermione somewhere safe. And you can’t defend yourself —”

Neville reached down and picked up Hermione’s wand. “I can.”

Amber looked to Cedric. “You can’t duel silently. You take Hermione and go.”

Cedric frowned and shook his head.

Though Harry was grateful for their loyalty, their stubbornness was exasperating. “This argument doesn’t matter if we can’t find the exit.”

“I’ll carry Herbime.” Neville took her weight from Amber and slung her over his shoulder. “You’re bedder ab fighding dem dan I am.”

Harry stuck his head out the doorway, wand ready, but the baby-headed Death Eater did not seem to notice them as he continued wailing and smashing clocks off of desks and running into grandfather clocks and shelves of hourglasses.

“C’mon, keep close.” Harry motioned for the others to follow him.

Carefully, they walked back towards the round, black marble room. The baby-headed Death Eater, consumed with confusion over its strange existence, paid them no mind as they slipped into the next room.

As soon as the door to the Time Room closed behind them, the room began to spin. The blue torches turned into a bright blue ring, spinning around the room. Harry’s knees felt weak and a small knot on the back of his head throbbed. He swayed slightly and grabbed Cedric’s arm for support.

When the spinning stopped, Harry realized that all the fiery marks Hermione had made were gone. Cedric looked equally devastated.
“Which way —” Amber started to ask when a door on their right sprang open.

Harry readied his wand, but instead of Death Eaters, it was Ron, Pearl, Luna, and Ginny who burst into the room.

“Pearl!” Amber shouted and embraced her sister.

Harry rushed over to Ron, who looked very pale with something black trickling from his mouth.

“Ron — are you alright?”

“Harry.” Ron giggled and grabbed the front of Harry’s robes. “There you are…. Ha ha ha…. You look funny, Harry, you’re all messed up….” Ron’s knees gave way and he pulled Harry down with him as he sank to the floor.

“Ginny?” asked Harry. “What’s happened?”

Ginny, too, was very pale. She leaned against a wall, like she was going to pass out without its support. Her breaths were short and quick. Harry was about to ask her what was wrong, but she slid to the ground, clutching her ankle.

“I think her ankle’s broken,” Luna whispered. “I heard something crack. Four of them chased us into a dark room full of planets — an odd place, some of the time we were just floating in the dark —”

“Harry, we saw Uranus up close!” said Ron. He laughed, weakly, and blood leaked down his chin. “Get it, Harry? We saw Uranus —”

“Anyway, one of them grabbed Ginny’s foot. I used the Reductor Curse and blew up Pluto in his face, but…. ” Luna shrugged and motioned to Ginny.

“And Ron?”

“I don’t know what they hit him with,” she said. “He’s gone a bit funny. I could hardly get him along at all.”

“You and Pearl are alright?”

“Broken wrist,” Pearl answered. She, too, looked like she was in pain, but Amber had already cut the sleeve of her robe and was wrapping Pearl’s wrist to stabilize it.

“I’ll get your ankle in a moment, Ginny,” said Amber.

Ginny did not respond.

“Harry,” Ron said, and pulled Harry down towards him as if he had a very important secret to share, “Harry, you know who this girl is? She’s Loony… Loony Lovegood… ha ha ha…."

Harry lifted Ron up and supported his weight with his shoulder. “We’ve got to get out of here.” They were all together now; there was no sense in staying and fighting. They were outnumbered and, though Harry didn’t like to admit it, outmatched. They were lucky to have made it this far.

Amber tied off the wrap on Pearl’s wrist and moved to help Ginny. “Let me get her taken care of.” With her wand, she cut the other sleeve of her robe into strips and began to wrap Ginny’s foot.

“Hurry,” said Harry.
He looked around at the doors. There were twelve rooms, and one was an exit. Harry did not like the odds. Cedric was inspecting each one, like he was looking for a clue to the way out.

“Any ideas?” Harry asked him.

Cedric shook his head.

“We could do that all-at-once trick again,” Pearl suggested.

“No,” said Amber. “Better we risk a pair of Death Eaters finding us than alerting all of them to where we are.” She tied off the wrap on Ginny’s foot and helped her stand. “Alright, let’s —”

But before they could decide on a door, one burst open and three Death Eaters ran into the room, Bellatrix Lestrange leading the charge.

“There they are!” she shouted.

Harry shouldered his way through the nearest door, dragging Ron with him. Luna and Pearl were right behind him. Amber helped Ginny hobble through, ducking under the sparks Bellatrix and the two at her heels cast at them. Neville carried Hermione through, and Harry watched Cedric try and fail to cast a silent Shield Charm. He took an orange spark to the chest and coughed up a mouthful of blood. He stumbled backwards through the door and Harry slammed it shut.

“Colloportus!” Harry shouted. There were three successive thuds as the Death Eaters slammed into the sealed door.

“It doesn’t matter,” one of the men said. “There are other ways in — We’ve got them!” he shouted to someone else. “They’re here!”

Harry turned. It was the Brain Room they had first encountered, before Cedric, Ginny, and Neville had arrived. The room was full of jars of green fluid and wiggling brains, and, to Harry’s dismay, the walls were all lined with doors.

“Quick!” Harry said, “Amber — Luna — Pearl — Neville —”

His friends hardly needed to be told what to do. Everyone who could ran down the sides of the room, sealing doors as quickly as possible. Neville struggled with his first door, his broken nose making it difficult to pronounce the incantation properly, but he got it just in time. A Death Eater thudded against it as Neville ran to the next one. Harry ran past Amber as she sealed another, praying they were moving faster than the Death Eaters. It seemed, for a moment, they were — then Luna screamed midway through her spell. Harry whipped around and saw her sail through the air. She collided with a desk and slid down on the other side. She did not get up.

“Get Potter!” screamed Bellatrix as she rushed into the room.

Harry sprinted back towards the black marble hall. Maybe if he could lure them all away with the prophecy, give his friends time to escape….

“Stupefy!” one of the Death Eaters shouted, and Harry saw Pearl fall to the ground.

Amber threw a Stunning Spell at the Death Eater but he ducked under it and made an arc with his wand. A silver band flew through the air and struck Amber in the chest. As she staggered, another Death Eater hit her with a red spark, and she fell beside her sister.

Harry jumped over them and shouted “Protego!” and blocked a red spark just before it hit his head.
Harry saw that Cedric had pulled Hermione under a desk in an attempt to keep her safe. Ron, however, was still in the middle of the room, and had gotten to his feet.

“Hey!” he said, stumbling forward as if he were drunk. “Hey, Harry, there are brains in here, ha ha ha, isn’t it weird, Harry?”

“Ron, get out of the way — get down —”

Ron pointed his wand at one of the tanks. “Honest, Harry, they’re brains — look — Accio Brain!”

“Ron, no!” Harry shouted, but it was too late.

The brain soared out of the green liquid and towards Ron. From the crevices of the tightly wound flesh, ribbons unfurled, with images moving across them, fragments of a film, a moving photograph, or an unfinished thought. Harry could not reach Ron in time to stop him from grabbing it. The ribbons, as soon as they touched him began to wrap around his arms, tightening as they crawled across his body.

“Harry, look what’s happen — oh — no — I don’t like it, no — stop —”

“Diffindo!” Harry shouted, but the spell passed through the strange tentacles harmlessly. They continued, tightening around Ron’s chest. Ron fell to the ground, still struggling.

“Harry, it’ll suffocate him!” Ginny screamed. She started to crawl towards Ron, but a red spark hit her in the face, and she fell to the floor.

Harry bit back a swear and tried to cut the ribbons around Ron’s throat, but he knew if he touched the ribbons, it would grab him too. Bellatrix was closing in on him and he didn’t have time to find a solution.

Cedric was suddenly at his side and pushed him towards the door. Harry knew if anyone could find a way to help Ron, it would be Cedric. It was more important for him to get the prophecy out of here if he truly wanted to save his friends. So he ran for the nearest open door, the one the Death Eaters had entered through.

He regretted not looking where he was going, because this room was the dark, cold room with the arch. Harry only made it three steps before he tumbled down the steep, wide stairs towards the center of the room. He did not stop falling until he had reached the bottom and collided with the dais of the arch. He struggled to his feet, even though every joint and bruise protested in pain. His head throbbed, from both his scar and where he had been thrown against the wall. The prophecy, at least, was still safely in his hand, unscratched.

Harry looked up and saw Death Eaters streaming through the door. They were laughing as they descended upon him, and their laughter echoed off the stone walls. Like, Harry, they’d suffered from the battle. One was covered in blood; another’s left arm was continuously twitching. A few were still masked, but Antonin Dolohov had arrived, freed of Harry’s Body-Bind Curse, and Bellatrix Lestrange, Lucius Malfoy, and Rookwood were all unmasked and approaching him, wands drawn. Another unmasked Death Eater brought up the rear. Harry remembered his face from the Daily Prophet, but not his name. He probably would have remembered if he had taken the time to think, but his mind was focused solely on what the Death Eater was dragging behind him in his white-gloved hands. Cedric struggled to free himself from the man’s grip, but his wand was tucked into the Death Eater’s belt.

Harry climbed up onto the dais, looking for an escape, but it was hopeless. He was surrounded
with nowhere to go.

“Potter, your race is run,” said Malfoy. “Now hand me the prophecy like a good boy.”

Even if Harry couldn’t save himself, maybe he could help his friends. “Let — let Cedric and the others go, and I’ll give it to you.”

But the Death Eaters laughed at this.

“You are not in a position to bargain, Potter.” Malfoy’s smug smile turned cruel. “I seem to recall you are responsive to a specific kind of persuasion. While Pyrites’s curses are certainly not as powerful as the Dark Lord’s, he does have a more… dramatic flair.”

The white-gloved Death Eater lifted Cedric by the collar of his robes and dragged the tip of his wand along Cedric’s forearm. Fabric tore, skin broke, and blood poured from Cedric’s arm in the wake of the wand’s movement. It spattered onto the white gloves. Cedric’s mouth opened in a silent scream. Harry did not know if this was worse than the graveyard. Listening to Cedric scream under the Crucius Curse had been awful. Watching Cedric writhe in pain with no voice was no better.

“Stop —” Harry felt his grip loosen on the prophecy.

Malfoy extended his hand once more. “That’s it, boy —”

“No!” Harry screamed. “Neville — go back — get them out of here!”

But Neville didn’t listen. He pointed Hermione’s wand at the nearest Death Eater and shouted, “Stubefy!” and turned to another to repeat the spell — but nothing happened. Whether it was because his nose was broken, or because it was Hermione’s wand, his spell did not work.

The Death Eaters laughed, and a large hooded one grabbed Neville and pulled his arms behind his back. Neville kicked and struggled, but it was no competition.

“Longbottoms have always been quite foolish. An unfortunate waste of blood.” Malfoy turned to Harry with a cold sneer. “Now, Potter, I believe we had nearly reached an agreeable end to this farce.”

“Longbottom?” Bellatrix Lestrange repeated. “Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy.” She climbed up two steps to get closer.

“The man grunted and struggled to keep Neville captive.

“No, no, no,” Bellatrix said. She had reached them now and circled Neville. “I was unfortunately interrupted while breaking your parents, child. Let’s see if I can manage it better this time.”

The Death Eater holding Cedric frowned, but he looked more amused than upset. “Must you always upstage me, Bella?”

Neville kicked at Bellatrix and the Death Eater holding him. He shouted to Harry, “Don’d gib id do dem! Don’t gib id —”

“Crucio!” Bella said.
Neville screamed in agony and the Death Eater dropped him. He writhed on the floor in pain.

Harry’s breaths felt too shallow, his head seemed light. His friends were going to die, here, and it was his fault.

“Stop, please —” Harry said.

Bellatrix ended the curse. Neville was left sobbing at her feet. With the heel of her boot, she pushed him so that he rolled down several steps, then followed with much more grace.

“That was just a taster.” She lifted her wand with a thrilled smile. “Now, Potter, either give us the prophecy, or watch your friends die the hard way!”

Pyrites pressed his wand to Cedric’s neck. “Or don’t, child. I would love the chance to outdo Bella.”

Harry was not about to give the Death Eater that chance. There was no choice here. He held the prophecy out to Malfoy.

But before Malfoy could climb onto the dais, another door burst open, and hope filled Harry in a way it never had before. The Order of the Phoenix had arrived.

James, Lily, Sirius, Remus, Alice and Frank Longbottom, Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks, and Kingsley all jumped down the steps, firing curses as they did. Malfoy ducked under Tonks’s Stunner and Harry dove out of the way as jinxes flew through the room. He slid off the dais and looked to Neville, who was crawling toward him. A few steps up, Harry saw Cedric, abandoned by the white-gloved Death Eater, collapsed and unmoving.

Harry ducked under another curse and dove towards Neville. Curses flew over their heads and crashed into each other and shields. Harry had to shout to be heard over the din. “Are you okay?” he said, and ducked again under a yellow light.

“Yes.” Neville put his hands on the step above and pulled himself up. “Are you?”

“Yeah — Did you see Ron?”

“He wab dill fiding de brain when I left. I —”

A spell hit the stone beside Neville’s hand and a small explosion knocked them both apart. Harry scrambled backwards, into a very solid body. A thick arm wrapped around his neck and pulled him up, off of the ground.

“Give it to me,” the Death Eater hissed. “Give me the prophecy —”

Harry scratched at the man’s arm, poking with his wand, but he had no breath to get out a spell. He was choking. Harry searched desperately for someone to come to his aid, but his mother was engaged in her duel, Tonks was throwing curses at Bellatrix, Remus was fighting the white-gloved Death Eater, Moody was dueling Dolohov, the Longbottoms were up against two masked men — His vision swam and he struggled for air, but there was none. Harry was alone and dying.

There was a sudden grunt and the man holding Harry crumpled to the ground. Harry fell with him, gasping for air now that the hold had relaxed. James helped Harry untangle himself from the Death Eater and get back on his feet.

“Alright?” James asked.
“Thanks — Dad — I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come, I thought —”

“It’s alright. We’ll talk later, Snitch. Get Neville and Cedric and get to Headquarters —”

Something deep violet flashed and struck James’s cheek. He hit the stone floor with a loud thud and his wand fell from his hand.

“Dad —” Harry turned to see Dolohov walking towards them with a wicked grin on his face. Behind him was Mad-Eye Moody, bloody and fallen. His magical eye had been dislodged from his head and it rolled across the stone floor until it rested against James’s body.

Harry felt frozen as Dolohov lifted his wand.

“Harry!” shouted Neville as Dolohov shouted, “Tarantallegra!”

Before the spell struck Harry, Neville pushed Harry aside, knocking Harry’s wand from his hand, and took the force of the curse. Neville’s legs floundered wildly, performing an uncontrollable dance as he struggled to get back up.

Harry scrambled for his wand as Dolohov approached. Dolohov lifted his wand and brought it down in the same arc of purple flame he had used against Hermione. Harry quickly shouted, “Protego!” and threw up his wand just in time. The flame cut through the shield and Harry felt as if he had been struck with a dull blade, but he did not fall as Hermione had fallen. He merely slid backwards a foot, into Neville’s still kicking legs.

“Accio Proph —”

Lily appeared suddenly, shoving Dolohov aside with her weight. As Dolohov stumbled away from Harry, Neville, and James, she shouted, “Confringo!”

The small explosion rocked the room and left a two-foot crater between Harry and Dolohov. Dolohov scrambled to his feet and threw a curse at Lily, but it bounced off her shield. Their duel was nothing but blurred wands and flashing sparks as Lily pushed him backwards, away from Harry. She did not stop to check on Harry nor James, and Harry wondered — if his dad had not stopped, would he still be able to fight now?

Dolohov raised his wand in that same arc motion, and Harry knew he was about to try that purple flame again. Harry, afraid for his mother’s life, took the opportunity and shouted, “Petrificus Totalus!”

Dolohov’s arms snapped to his sides and he fell, a twice-victim of the spell Harry had cursed him with back in that tiny office.

“Good form, Harry,” Lily said. “Now get out of here!”

If she was angry with Harry for breaking his promise to her, she did not show it. Harry imagined she had many other things to be concerned about right now, and he had no desire to put his family at further risk by being someone they needed to protect.

Harry grabbed Neville, whose legs were still jerking, and pulled him towards the exit. If he could just get Neville out and come back for Cedric….

Harry ducked under a green spark and pulled Neville down with him. Neville could not stand, but he used his arms to haul himself along. He grabbed the edge of one of the stone steps and tried to pull himself. A red spark flew at him as he lifted his head, but it bounced off a shield. Harry turned
and saw Frank Longbottom behind them, but it was only for a moment. In the time he had taken to
protect his son, he had been struck with a Stunner from behind. He crumpled to the ground, and
Harry pushed Neville up the stairs.

They passed Sirius and Remus, who were back-to-back, engaged with a masked Death Eater and
Pyrites. Harry and Neville had barely managed to crawl past the battle when there was a scream,
and Tonks tumbled down the stairs as Bellatrix’s cackle echoed off the stone walls. Tonks stopped
at Sirius’s feet. With a snarl, Sirius thrust his wand forward, and the Death Eater he had been
dueling crumpled to the ground. Sirius threw a red spark at Bellatrix, who matched it. There was a
small explosion as the sparks collided in midair, and Bellatrix jumped down the steps, eager to
engage her cousin.

A loud crack echoed suddenly, and Remus’s right hand lurched. Shards of wand wood fell to the
ground. Pyrites raised his wand to attack his now defenseless opponent. Remus, though, was
quicker, and pulled Sirius down to the ground with him.

Sirius’s jinx went wide, hitting the ceiling above Bellatrix, but, perhaps as Remus had intended,
Pyrites’ curse passed over them and cut right through Bellatrix. Blood pooled on the front of her
robes. She screamed and Petrified Pyrites. The white-gloved Death Eater fell with a panicked look
plastered on his face.

Sirius stood. His face was a picture of delight. “Come now, Bella, he didn’t mean it. Accidents
happen.” He threw another Stunning Spell at her, and she again, countered with her own, but threw
a second right behind it. It passed through the small burst of light and collided with Sirius’s chest.

“No!” Remus and Harry shouted at the same time.

Remus’s hand closed around the nearest wand — Tonks’s — and he threw a curse at Bellatrix. She
screamed, but stayed on her feet and threw a green spark at Remus. Remus side-stepped it, and
threw an orange light at her.

Harry did not see if it landed. Lucius Malfoy lunged at him, knocking him backwards so the sharp
corner of the stair collided with the center of his back. Neville fell over, legs still flailing, unable to
get to his feet.

“Give it to me, Potter — give me the prophecy!” Malfoy was desperate as he held Harry down, one
hand sticking his wand into Harry’s ribs, the other reaching for the glowing blue glass.

“No — get — off — Neville! Catch it!” Harry rolled the ball across the stone floor so that it hit
Neville’s side. Neville curled his entire body around the ball and Malfoy released Harry.

Harry tumbled over the step and got up, intending to Stun Malfoy and protect Neville, but a small
explosion knocked Malfoy off of his feet.

Alice Longbottom helped Harry to his feet, then blocked a curse from Malfoy. “Get out of here,
boys,” she said, and threw a curse in the same breath. “You’ve done great, but we’ve got it from
—” She stumbled as a curse struck her shoulder. Her wand arm hung limp at her side.

Harry recognized Rabastan Lestrange from Dumbledore’s memories. Rabastan threw another curse
at Alice, but she switched dueling hands and cast a shield up just in time.

Harry helped Neville up and pushed him towards the next step. There were only a few more to go.
If he could get Neville into the hall, then get Cedric out, make sure Ron was okay, find Ginny,
Hermione, Luna, Pearl, Amber….
“Come on,” Harry said, trying to haul Neville up the step. “Push with your legs — just try —”

Neville did try, and slipped, and dropped the prophecy.

It bounced down the step, once, past Alice’s foot as she blocked another curse from Rabastan, twice past Tonks and Sirius’s bodies, a third time past Lily as she threw a fiery explosion at a masked Death Eater, and then it shattered.

Blue smoke spilled from the glass shards, a flame rose from it, and the flame and smoke took the shape of a woman with large eyes, spewing a prophecy, but her words were lost in the sounds of curses colliding. And then, after a moment of speaking into the din, she was gone.

“Harry — I’b sorry —”

“It doesn’t matter.” Harry pulled on Neville’s robes again. “We just need to get out —”

There was another explosion and Harry heard Remus yell. He turned to see Lily joining the duel against Bellatrix. The explosion had rebounded against Bellatrix’s shield and struck Remus. Remus covered his face with one hand and threw a blind curse in Bellatrix’s direction. It sailed over her shoulder and collided with the stone wall. Bellatrix returned it with a silver spark, but Lily cast a shield over Remus and it dissipated in a bright light.

Harry watched Bellatrix thrust her wand forward, and slung a jet of green fire towards Lily. Harry saw her hand make half the movement for a Shield Charm, but it was not fast enough.

“Dumbledore!” Neville said suddenly, but Harry hardly heard him.

Harry could only watch as the green flame struck Lily squarely in the chest. It seemed to go around and through her and her bright green eyes went wide.

Neville grabbed Harry’s arm. “Id’s Dumbledore! We’re sabed, Harry!”

But Harry did not feel saved as he watched his mother collide with the dais of the arch and fall to the ground. She did not move from where she fell.
Dumbledore walked quickly down the steps, wand drawn and already casting curses. The remaining Death Eaters bolted for the doors. They yelled to each other to run, get out, abandon the mission. Five Aurors and four accomplished duelists hadn’t scared them, but this one man did. The only Death Eater still engaged in a duel was Bellatrix, and Remus was struggling to keep her at bay.

Harry started forward to try to help Remus, but Alice Longbottom grabbed his arm. “You can’t go down there, Harry.” She let him go to point her wand at Neville. “Finite,” she said, and his legs stopped thrashing about.

Alice wiped some blood from her chin, but it continued to trickle from the corner of her mouth. She frowned, but she did not appear to be in any pain. If anything, she seemed mildly annoyed by it. “I’m proud of you both, truly. You’ve fought bravely.” She helped Neville to his feet. “Where are the others? We should get you all to safety.”

“Dey’re all back dere,” Neville said, gesturing to the door.

“Oh — dear, your nose — Hold still, son.” Alice waved her wand and there was a small crack. Neville yelped and his hands flew to his face. When he pulled them away, his nose was set straight. “Evanesco,” she said, and the blood on Neville’s face Vanished. “Much better. Now, is everyone alright?”

“A brain attacked Ron,” Neville said, “and Hermione is unconscious, but she has a pulse — and Luna and Amber and Pearl and Ginny all got hit — and Cedric —” Neville gestured helplessly down the stone steps.

Harry stared down at the battlefield below. Cedric was still lying in a pool of his own blood where Pyrites had dropped him. Moody had gotten back up, crawled over to where Tonks and Sirius lay, and was attempting to revive them both. Frank was just beginning to sit up. Not too far away was James, something black spreading across his face like ink, and Lily was still motionless on the
floor beside the arch. Bellatrix was the only Death Eater still on her feet, engaged in her duel with Remus.

The rest of the Death Eaters had been rounded up by Dumbledore and thrown into a golden bind, channeled by Kingsley’s wand. It held them in place as Dumbledore pulled the final retreaters from the stone steps and seemed to almost toss them through the air into the circle.

“We’ll get Cedric,” Alice said. “You go get the others and get out —”

Remus let out a sudden cry of alarm as he tumbled off the dais. He hit the stone floor and Bellatrix ran past him, headed for the door. Dumbledore threw a spell at her, but she put up a shield and the curse bounced off of it.

Harry felt his heart race in his chest. She was getting away, after everything she had done tonight, she was getting away — and it was his fault. Harry had brought all of this here. Harry was the reason his parents were dying, the reason Cedric was dying, and he had to do something to make it right.

Harry ran after Bellatrix. Alice grabbed for him, but with only one usable arm, she could not hold him.

“Harry!” Neville shouted after him.

Harry shouted, “Stupefy!” and a red spark flew at Bellatrix. She laughed and ducked under it as she made it to the door.

Harry did not stop as he chased her into the brain room. She had tortured Neville, she had hurt Sirius, his mother, Remus — and she had delighted in it. He remembered, too, how she had laughed when the Wizengamot had charged her with the torture of the Longbottoms. Harry would not let her get away, not tonight. Enough had gone wrong on his account.

Bellatrix cast a curse over her shoulder, striking one of the large tanks of brains. It lifted off of the desk and collided with Harry, drenching him the green liquid. The smell of it burned his nose and dried out his throat, but Harry was more concerned with the brain, whose tentacles were now descending on him.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” and it halted its approach midair.

Harry slipped past Luna, who was groaning on the floor, past Ron, who was still struggling against the brain, past Ginny, who had just sat up and called after him, past Pearl, who was trying to rouse her sister, into the black marble room of a dozen doors. He saw Bellatrix running through the exit and headed towards her.

Before he could get through, the door slammed shut and the room began to spin.

“No!” Harry shouted. He stumbled backwards, away from the dizzying blue lights as they whirled around him. He did not know how to find her. He did not even know how to get back to the others. “Show me the exit,” he begged of the room. “Please, where’s the way out?”

The door behind Harry flew open, as if the room had simply been waiting for such a question. Harry could hear the clattering of the lift at the end of the hallway and he sprinted after it. She was gone by the time he reached the lifts, but Harry wasn’t going to let that stop him. He banged his fist against the button to call for another lift. It glowed gold and within a moment a lift had descended to meet him. Harry slammed the gate open and hit the button for the Atrium. He did not even close the grill again, and leapt out before the lift had quite stopped at the floor above.
He could see Bellatrix ahead of him, footsteps echoing across the empty hall as she passed the golden gates. Harry put on a burst of speed. If she got far enough away, she could probably Apparate out. Harry wasn’t about to let that happen.

Harry threw a Stunning Spell at her. She turned and countered with one of her own. The crash of the curses colliding echoed throughout the Atrium and rang in Harry’s ears.

Bellatrix laughed and paused her retreat. “Come to play, little Harry?” She threw another red spark and Harry ducked behind the large golden fountain of the witch, wizard, centaur, goblin, and house-elf. Her spell struck the golden gates behind him with a loud clang.

“All by your lonesome, bitty baby Potter?”

Harry could hear her footsteps approaching.

“No friends with you this time? No Mummy and Daddy to protect you? I heard what you did in the graveyard. You’re a very foolish boy, challenging the Dark Lord. I heard you cried, just like tonight, when they tortured poor little Diggory —”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

But she blocked it with a shield.

“Poor Potter. You’ll have to do better than that against me. You’ll have to do better than your parents did. That was rather nasty of Dolohov, what he did to your dear old dad, and your Mudblood Mother —”

“Crucio!”

Harry’s spell hit Bellatrix square in the chest and she toppled backwards with a small scream. It did not last as long as Harry had hoped. She was on her feet in a moment, and threw a spell at him. Harry hid behind the fountain, and her spell struck the golden wizard in the head. There was a horrible sound as the metal was wrenched apart, and the wizard’s head flew from the fountain, skidding to a stop not far from the golden gates.

“First time using an Unforgivable Curse, is it?” Bellatrix shouted at him, but she was no longer laughing or mocking. She was furious. “You need to mean it, Potter. You need to enjoy it. You can ask my wretched cousin Sirius — or, I suppose you can’t, can you? Shall I give you a lesson, then?”

Harry ducked behind the centaur as she screamed, “Crucio!” and the spell knocked aside the centaur’s arms. They landed not far from the golden gates.

“Pathetic little boy. What did you hope to accomplish, chasing me? I was and am the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant, I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you can never hope to compete —”

“Stupefy!” Harry shouted.

“Protego!”

The red spark rebounded and struck the goblin in the ear.

“Give me the prophecy, Potter, or I’ll do to you like I did to your mutt werewolf pet —”
“It’s gone!” Harry shouted, and his forehead flared with pain as his gut filled with anger. “The prophecy is gone,” and Harry actually laughed as the pain increased. “It’s gone and he knows! Your dear old mate Voldemort knows it’s gone! He’s not going to be happy with you, is he?”

“What —” and for the first time, Harry heard fear in Bellatrix’s voice. “What do you mean, gone, boy?”

“It smashed in the battle. No one heard it. It’s lost. What do you think Voldemort’ll say about that, then?”

Harry could hardly see, the pain in his scar grew so hot, so intense. He could hardly hear Bellatrix’s shrieking anymore.

“Liar! You’ve got it, Potter, and you will give it to me — Accio Prophecy! Accio Prophecy!”

Harry’s hands flew to his scar, pressing against the pain, trying to keep his head from bursting into two. He felt, well and truly, as if Voldemort himself was going to climb out of his skull.

“No!” Bellatrix screamed. “It isn’t true! You’re lying! — Master, I tried, I tried — Do not punish me —”

“He can’t hear you from here,” Harry shouted with a laugh, despite the pain tearing through him. “Can’t I, Potter?”

Harry’s eyes opened, and though his vision was blurred and bright with pain, Harry did not need any assistance remembering what Voldemort looked like.

The tall, thin man stood between Harry and the golden gates in his long black robe. He knelt in front of Harry and his red eyes, snake-like and piercing, stared into Harry’s.

“So you smashed my prophecy?” His face was cold, unfeeling, and cruel. “No, Bella, he is not lying. I see the truth looking at me from within his worthless mind…. ” Voldemort straightened and flourished his wand. “Months of preparation, months of effort… Torturing one of my most devoted followers…. Once again, my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” Bellatrix sobbed. She came around the fountain to kneel at Voldemort’s feet. “I knew not, I was fighting the Potters — Master, you should know —”

“Quiet, Bella. I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your sniveling apologies?”

“But Master,” she whispered, “he is here — he is below —”

Voldemort pushed her aside. “Now, Potter, it seems there is nothing more to be said. You have irked me too often, for too long. Avada Kedavra!”

Harry flinched as the spell came, knowing there was nothing he could do to deflect it, knowing it was his fault everything had gone so wrong in the Ministry, his fault his friends were hurt and dying, his fault his parents were hurt and dying —

But the curse did not strike. There was a thud, and when Harry opened his eyes, he saw the headless golden wizard had come to life and now stood between him and Voldemort. The curse had bounced off, and crashed into the blue and gold ceiling above.
Voldemort whirled around to face the golden gates, and Harry peered over the calf of the golden wizard.

Dumbledore strode into the Atrium, face calm, pace steady but unhurried.

“Dumbledore!” Voldemort thrust his wand at Dumbledore and a green spark shot towards the gates. Dumbledore, however, vanished, and the spell passed harmlessly through the place he had been standing. Dumbledore reappeared beside Voldemort and waved his wand at the fountain. Each of the golden statues suddenly animated. The witch advanced on Bellatrix and pinned her to the floor. Bellatrix’s curses did nothing against the woman’s golden chest. The house-elf and goblin statues disappeared into the fireplaces at the end of the hall, and the headless wizard pushed Harry back, against the wall, away from Voldemort and Dumbledore, while the armless centaur charged at Voldemort.

Voldemort vanished from the path of the centaur and reappeared on the other side of the pool.

“It was foolish to come here tonight, Tom,” said Dumbledore in a quiet voice. “The Aurors are on their way.”

“By which time I shall be gone, and you dead!” Voldemort threw another Killing Curse at Dumbledore, but it missed its intended target and struck the security desk by the golden gates. Dumbledore moved his wand in a short arc and a large wave of force surged across the surface of the fountain. The water rippled and splashed, and even Harry felt the hair on his arms rise in terror as the spell struck the golden statue that shielded him from the duel.

Voldemort had a shield of his own Conjured in a moment. The silver plate resounded like a gong as it protected Voldemort from the curse.

“You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?” Voldemort shouted. “Above such brutality, are you?”

“We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man.” Dumbledore walked around the fountain at the same calm, composed pace he had entered the Atrium with. “Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit —”

“There is nothing worse than death!”

“You are quite wrong, Tom.”

Harry felt terrified as he watched Dumbledore approach Voldemort so calmly, so slowly. He had just watched his parents and friends duel Death Eaters with frenzy, where any hesitation could cost someone their life. Dumbledore’s serenity worried Harry — and yet he also felt terrified for Voldemort. Dumbledore’s power was legendary, and Harry had been studying magic long enough to know that humility often belied incredible power.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore continued, “your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness —”

Voldemort threw another Killing Curse at Dumbledore, but this time, the green spark struck the galloping centaur as it flew in front of Dumbledore. The golden statue shattered into pieces, and before the bits of gold had even hit the floor, Dumbledore threw a thin flame at Voldemort. The fire encircled Voldemort and tightened, pinning him and his shield together. The flame, however, transformed into a snake that released Voldemort and slithered towards Dumbledore, hissing, fangs extended.

Voldemort vanished. As he reappeared on the platform in the center of the fountain, a flame burst
over Dumbledore’s head.

“Look out —” Harry shouted, but his warning was irrelevant.

Voldemort threw a green spark at Dumbledore just as the serpent leapt to strike. From the flame over Dumbledore’s head swooped Fawkes, swallowing the curse in a single gulp. The mythical bird burst into flame, then crumpled to the floor, a pile of ash and a baby, flightless, featherless chick once more. The serpent did not even reach Dumbledore. Before its fangs made contact, Dumbledore waved his wand and it vanished into dark smoke.

The water surrounding Voldemort sprang to life. First small droplets, then in streaks large enough to fill buckets, the water swirled and encased Voldemort. It twisted around him, drowning him, holding him —

And then Voldemort was gone. The water collapsed back into the pool, spilling and splashing over the sides. Bellatrix screamed.

Harry ducked under the arm of the wizard statue in an attempt to reach Dumbledore, but Dumbledore threw up his hand.

“Stay where you are, Harry!”

Harry froze, unsure what Dumbledore seemed so afraid of. He listened, but it was only Bellatrix’s cries and the croaks of Fawkes —

Harry screamed as his scar ripped apart. He collapsed onto the floor, and then he was entirely unaware of the floor. There was nothing, nothing he could feel except the burning in his scar, unlike any pain it had been before. This was worse than nightmares, worse than visions, worse than anything Harry had ever imagined. Something seemed to coil its way around Harry, something slithering, with red eyes, something that seemed to both contain him and slip inside him. Harry could no longer tell where he ended and the creature began, he was trapped, and in pain, and Harry felt his mouth open with words that were not his own.

“Kill me now, Dumbledore,” the creature hissed.

Harry screamed.

“If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy.”

Harry thought that it would not be so bad to die. It would be better than this pain, certainly.

Then Harry remembered his mother, and his father, and Remus, and Sirius, and all they had fought for, so that he could live. They had fought to protect him, and Harry found that he did not want to die at all, that he wanted to be someone they could be proud of. Even if his family was dying in the Department of Mysteries, he wanted to be everything they dreamed for him. Harry wanted to live.

And as he remembered them, the pain vanished as quickly as it had come.

Slowly, Harry remembered where he was, on the floor of the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He felt horribly cold, like the room had frozen over. He shivered and opened his eyes. Everything was blurry and he struggled to clear his head. His hand brushed against his glasses near the heel of the golden statue. He put them on and saw that the statue was no longer a shield for him, but it was cracked into pieces and lying on its back.

Dumbledore was suddenly in front of him. “Are you alright, Harry?”
“Y-yes,” Harry said, but he was still trembling all over. He was cold in his core, and he did not understand what had just happened.

Then Dumbledore stepped aside and Harry’s vision was consumed with Sirius.

“Harry! Harry are you alright?”

Harry felt tears well up in his eyes. “Yes — are you? Where’s Voldemort — and Mum and Dad and Remus and Cedric and — Ron and Hermione and — who are all these — what’s —”

Sirius helped Harry sit up, for Harry was shaking too badly to do it himself. “I was only Stunned — Merlin, you’re cold as an Everlasting Icicle. Here.” Sirius pressed the tip of his wand against Harry’s chest. It glowed a warm yellow, and Harry felt like he had take a sip of hot cocoa on a cold Christmas. It flooded through him, pushing out the cold. It did not help with the trembling.

“He was there!” someone shouted, and Harry looked around Sirius to get a better glimpse at the people who were filling the Atrium.

A man with a long white ponytail and bright red robes pointed to where the witch statue had been — she was now nothing but gold shards. “I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear, it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated.”

Cornelius Fudge stepped to the front of the crowd of witches and wizards, led by a golden house-elf and goblin. “I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!” He was still in his pajamas and his mouth opened and closed without sound, like he had forgotten how to work it for a moment. “Merlin’s beard — here — here — in the Ministry of Magic! Great heavens above — it doesn’t seem possible — my word — how can this be?”

Dumbledore, satisfied to know Harry was in good hands, stood and addressed the crowd. “If you proceed downstairs into the Department of Mysteries, Cornelius, you will find several escaped Death Eaters contained in the Death Chamber, and awaiting your decision as what to do with them.”

“Wha — Dumbledore!” It was as if Fudge had not even noticed him until he spoke. “You — here — I —” Fudge looked around to the Aurors on either side of him. A few had their wands raised, as if they were waiting for orders to arrest Dumbledore. Most were merely staring.

“Cornelius,” said Dumbledore, “I am ready to fight your men — and win again! But a few minutes ago you saw proof, with your own eyes, that I have been telling you the truth for a year. Lord Voldemort has returned, you have been chasing the wrong men for twelve months, and it is time you listened to sense!”

“I — don’t — well —” Fudge looked to his Aurors for help, but they were not the Minister of Magic. No one could tell him how he was supposed to do his job. “Very well — Dawlish, Williamson, go down to the Department of Mysteries and see. Dumbledore, you — you will need to tell me exactly — the Fountain of Magical Brethren — what happened?”

“I will discuss everything with you shortly. Firstly, you will give the order to rescind Amelia Bones’s position at Hogwarts as the Interim High Inquisitor —”

“What — Amelia Bones — but how —”

“I’m sure her work this evening has been excellent, but it is time she came back here. Dolores Umbridge will also, of course, be removed from Hogwarts. You will tell your Aurors to stop searching for my Care of Magical Creatures teacher so that he can return to work.”
“But — I don’t understand —”

Dumbledore turned back to Harry and Sirius. “I can entrust Harry to your care, Sirius?”

“Yeah, I got him,” Sirius said.

“If James and Lily recover, let them know it’s time, and if they do not…. .”

Harry felt as if that “not” echoed in the Atrium long after Dumbledore had stopped speaking.

“Yeah — Yes — Of course, Dumbledore. I can do that.” Sirius stumbled over his words, and Harry felt like everything he had ever depended on was crumbling from beneath him.

Sirius pulled Harry to his feet. “You feel okay to Side-Along?”

“Yes — I think so. Is someone helping Mum and Dad and Remus? Should you —”

“Remus is alright. I’m taking care of you right now.”

Harry noticed that Sirius did not address his parents’ condition. He felt afraid to ask.

Sirius must have noticed the fear on Harry’s face because he said, “It’ll be alright, Harry.”

Harry wasn’t sure he believed him.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciated!
The Lost Prophecy

Chapter Summary

Harry gets the answers he's been waiting for.

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving to my American readers! It's been so nice having this week off. I've gotten to write some self-indulgent pieces and even read a bit and it's been lovely. I also saw Crimes of Grindelwald which was... well, less lovely. To each their own, though.

Special thanks to my beta, ageofzero who always manages to get me chapters in a timely fashion, despite how chaotic their life is! Without them, this fic wouldn't be nearly so polished.

Lastly, a heads up: This chapter is dialogue heavy, with a lot of information. Here we go~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

St. Mungo’s was much quieter at night. It was almost eerie the way footsteps seemed to echo in the waiting room, drowning out whispered conversation. The chaos Harry had seen over the holidays, during the day, as visitors came to see loved ones or drop off gifts, as wizards with various illnesses or conditions arrived for appointments, was entirely absent from the evening shift.

The only people in the waiting room were a young woman in ragged clothes, who coughed loudly into her hands every so often, and the Welcome Witch, busy behind her desk.

She only noticed the new arrivals when Sirius cleared his throat to announce them. She turned, and immediately wrinkled her nose. Harry could see that, despite the empty waiting room, she was clearly overwhelmed. Several flashing blue orbs rested on the edge of her desk, demanding her attention, and she was hastily filling out a sheet of parchment. Sirius and Harry were an annoying distraction to her. She opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but Sirius spoke first.

“He’s not hurt,” Sirius put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “We were just wondering where we could wait for news about his parents.”

The witch was neither surprised nor impressed as Sirius gave her Harry’s name. She did not appear to have the time to be. She waved her wand over the flashing orbs and, after a moment, told them, “They’ll be on the fourth floor, intensive care, but their current ward is off limits to visitors. You can wait down here until I receive word they’re in stable condition — or the tea shop opens shortly if you’re hungry.” She delivered her information quickly and clearly. There was no hint of concern nor gentleness as she spoke.

“Thanks,” Sirius said, and turned, hand on Harry’s shoulder to lead him to a chair.
“Wait — young man,” the witch said, as if she had already forgotten Harry’s name, “you’re hardly sterile enough to be in a hospital. What are you covered in?”

Harry glanced down at his robes, dried now, and he’d gotten used to the stench, but they were still crusted in green flakes that almost looked like mold. “Er — giant’s blood — and… I’m not sure, actually. Brain juice?”

She did not react to being told the young man before her was coated in dried giant’s blood. It seemed she had seen far worse things in her time as a Welcome Witch. She merely picked up her wand again and silently issued three successive spells. Harry felt a rush of warm air as the light of her wand passed through him, then a tingling over his whole body, not unlike the feeling of his robes changing colors as he’d been sorted into Gryffindor. When he looked down, his robes were clean and dry.

“You can wait there,” she said, and pointed her wand at a set of empty chairs near the stairwell, away from the witch with a dramatic cough. The Welcome Witch returned to her desk, business clearly finished.

They sat down, and Harry could not help turning over the witch’s words. His parents were not stable. There was no guarantee the Healers could fix them — whatever curses Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov had cast might not be reversible.

Harry glanced at the Welcome Witch, who was busy and distracted, and at the ragged woman, who appeared to have fallen asleep, despite her cough. In a quiet voice, Harry asked, “What did Dumbledore mean about — about if Mum and Dad don’t….” But he found he couldn’t even finish the thought.

Sirius took a moment to answer. When he did speak, he sounded far away, hollowed out and dry. “Just that I’m your godfather, so their responsibilities would fall to me.”

That knowledge had always seemed so innocuous to Harry. Sirius was his godfather, and that meant Sirius was family. That meant motorcycle rides and trips to London. That meant Quidditch games at midnight and extra scoops of ice cream when Mum and Dad were away. Harry had never considered the idea that his parents might not be there one day, and Sirius would have to take care of him.

He remembered the photograph Moody had shown him back in August — all those people, hardly older than Harry — and he thought about how many of them had not survived. His parents must have known that dying in the fight against Voldemort was a very real possibility. This was exactly what they’d had in mind when they’d named Sirius as Harry’s godfather.

“I’m sorry —” Harry said suddenly. “I’m sorry — if I hadn’t gone to the Ministry — none of this —”

“Hey — no, this isn’t your fault Harry. You can’t blame yourself for doing what you thought was right. Any of us would have done the same.”

“You’d have gone to the Ministry to save Snape?”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t have, but your Mum and Dad would have.”

“But Snape wasn’t there — it was a trap — Hermione tried to tell me — Cedric tried to tell me — and I didn’t listen.” Harry heaved in a deep breath and felt all his guilt twist into anger. His head throbbed. “If someone had just told me what was going on, if I had just known that Voldemort
could do something like this, that he wanted that prophecy and needed me to get it —”

“You’re right, Harry. Tonight’s on all of us. Remus and I were supposed to be at Headquarters in case of an emergency. Your mum’s the one who was supposed to be watching the Department of Mysteries tonight. You never should have been on your own tonight.”

“Why weren’t you? Why wasn’t anyone there?”

Sirius let out a long slow breath. His hand slipped into the pocket of his leather jacket. He half-laughed as he pulled out a wadded up gum wrapper. “You know I smoked when I was your age? Mostly to piss off my mother. Lily’s the one who made me quit, a condition of being your godfather. I haven’t wanted one in a long time….” Sirius patted down his pockets until he found a packet of chewing gum. He offered a stick to Harry, but Harry shook his head.

Sirius took a moment, softening up the gum and twisting the wrapper between his fingers, before speaking again. “Snape came by after breakfast. Told us he’d just taken McGonagall to St. Mungo’s, and everything that had happened at Hogwarts. Your mum was, understandably, furious. She and your Dad went charging off to Hogwarts to pull you out. Snape knew he needed to wait a bit before following, so Umbridge wouldn’t know he was the one who had alerted them. That meant me, Remus, Snape, my brother, and Fabian and Gideon spent about an hour talking awkwardly in the kitchen. Fabian was about to go on watch at the Department of Mysteries, taking over for Kingsley, when Snape’s Dark Mark started burning. Snape couldn’t ignore something like that, and I think he suspected it was going to be about your dip into his memories.”

Though Sirius did not look at Harry when he said it, and there was no edge in his voice, Harry’s stomach still turned over with guilt.

“Fabian and Gideon decided they weren’t letting Snape go without backup, in case it went badly. Fabian was supposed to get word to Kingsley or Mad-Eye about watch, but I don’t think that message ever made it.”

“So Snape really was being tortured by Voldemort?” Harry was filled suddenly with a fury aimed at Regulus. Regulus had known where Snape was when Harry had used the mirror to call Headquarters. He’d known Snape was with Voldemort and he had still dismissed Harry’s vision. “What I saw… really happened?”

“Probably. I don’t think Voldemort needed to torture Snape to put that vision in your head. I’m sure it helped, though. And of course Voldemort couldn’t risk Snape being at Hogwarts for his little trick to work. He knows what you’re like. He knows you’ll go into danger to help people. You did it when you went after Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, when you gave yourself up to try to save Cedric in the graveyard…. I don’t know if he picked Snape to test you or to test Snape. Maybe both. Doesn’t matter now. Obviously Voldemort didn’t torture Snape in the Department of Mysteries. That bit was fabricated. I do like the image of Lucius Malfoy sitting there in the dark, waiting all bloody day for you to show.” Sirius laughed, but it wasn’t a particularly humorous laugh. The malice in it reminded Harry uncomfortably of Bellatrix.

“Is Snape alright?”

Sirius paused. “We don’t know yet. Haven’t heard from the Prewetts…. ”

“Wait — if Mum and Dad came to get me before lunchtime… why didn’t I ever see them?”

“That’s Umbridge’s doing. I wasn’t there, so I don’t know what exactly Umbridge said or how long she fought with your parents for, but, from what I got from your mother’s ranting when they
came back, Umbridge wasn’t about to let you run off to Dumbledore. She said she had a job as Headmistress to make sure you were kept out of trouble and she didn’t have to release you to your parents until the school year was over. Which is hippogriff shit. I know from experience Hogwarts has to release you to your parents, whether you want to go or not.” Sirius paused a moment, and Harry felt like he had seen enough of Grimmauld Place this year that he did not need to ask.

“Your parents left Hogwarts to get reinforcements. They told me and Remus what had happened, and I think they were hoping maybe the Longbottoms or Kingsley would be at Headquarters, someone who could connect them to someone in the Ministry that could put Umbridge in her place, but it was just us. Remus is the one who suggested we go to Amelia Bones. She knows your dad, she supported you at your trial, and she deals with disciplining underage wizards. It was the best connection we could come up with on short notice. So we all went down to her office —”

“Remus went to the Ministry of Magic?”

“Yeah. Shocked me too. But he came with us all the way up to Bones’s office. She heard us out, assured us we had every right to pull you out of Hogwarts. The idea of a High Inquisitor is a new position, so she spent some time looking at regulations, checking what authority she had, or if she had to go to someone else. She ended up just going back to Hogwarts with all of us. But by then you were gone, and so was Umbridge. Honestly, I thought Umbridge had lost her head and taken you off to the Forbidden Forest to kill you. I nearly went charging into the forest after you. Bones took control of Hogwarts, though, declared herself in charge while Umbridge was missing, had the Heads of House take an account of all the missing students. When we figured out that half the missing kids were Order kids we thought maybe something had happened and we hoped you guys had run off to Headquarters. So we hurried back and Regulus told us everything that had happened — that he’d talked to you and to Cedric, and your mum about had a heart attack. In all the trouble with Umbridge, she’d completely forgotten about her watch at the door that night. Your dad told her it was probably fine, and someone from the Order would be there, but then Moody, Tonks, Kingsley, and the Longbottoms showed up, and we realized somewhere between Fabian and Lily, the watch had been neglected. We all headed off to the Ministry to find you, and Regulus was left to report to Dumbledore, who was supposed to be at Headquarters within the hour. And, well, you know the rest.”

“I don’t know the rest!” Harry’s head throbbed. Anger still burned inside of him. His parents had spent so much time trying to protect him, trying to shield him, and they’d still ended up here, with Harry falling into Voldemort’s trap, with his parents cursed…. “I don’t know what the prophecy said, I don’t know why —” The ragged witch coughed and Harry forced himself to lower his voice. “I don’t know why Voldemort wanted it so badly — I don’t know what happened to me after Voldemort Disapparated, I don’t know why I have this connection to Voldemort, or why he came after Mum and Dad when I was a baby — and what did Dumbledore mean, ‘it’s time’?”

Sirius spat his gum into the wrapper and wadded it up. “Your mum and dad could answer all that better than I could. I’ll try if I have to, but…."

Harry understood. He did not like it, but he understood. He’d certainly prefer to have this conversation with his parents, but he felt so desperate for answers.

Sirius pulled out another stick of gum, but this time, he Transfigured it into a cigarette and lit it with his wand. Harry wondered how many nights Sirius had spent just like this, all those years ago, sitting up through the night, worried about friends and loved ones.

This Sirius that Harry was catching a glimpse of was so much more like the Sirius that Harry had seen in Snape’s memories. Someone reckless, someone with no regard for rules, whether those
rules were hexing students or smoking in hospitals. None of that, however, changed that Sirius was also kind, good, and brave. Sirius was still the same person Harry had grown up with, it was only that Harry was seeing more of Sirius now.

Harry had thought, earlier this year, that he had only been seeing glimpses of his parents since Voldemort had returned. The love, joy, and warmth he’d grown up with was fragmented, interrupted by worry and pain. He realized, now, that he was actually seeing his family more completely than he ever had before. This was who they had always been. Love and worry went hand in hand, as did joy and fear. If you had something wonderful, it was always possible you could lose it. His parents understood that, and probably always had. It was only that Harry was seeing both sides of it for the first time.

He did not know if he should blame the war, or if he should just accept it as a truth of growing up.

It did not take long for the Welcome Witch to come around her desk and Vanish Sirius’s cigarette. Despite how busy she was, she found she had the time to give Sirius a five-minute lecture on the dangers of smoking. She rounded it off with an additional five minutes warning Harry about bad influences, and repeating some of the more horrific effects of smoking. If Harry hadn’t had so much guilt and anger twisted up inside of him, he might have found the situation funny.

When she returned to her desk, still huffing about the audacity of some wizards, Sirius checked his pocket watch and said, “We should head upstairs and get some food. You must be starved.”

Harry hadn’t eaten since lunch before his exam, and that seemed like years ago. His stomach tensed at the thought of food, but Harry didn’t truly feel like eating. He was afraid to leave the Welcome Witch’s sight, afraid to have any delay on news of his parents.

But Sirius stood, so Harry got up and followed him to the stairs.

The gift shop for the hospital was still closed, but the cafe was just beginning to open its doors. The witch and wizard staff in their pale blue robes did not seem thrilled at the idea of having customers so early, but they made Sirius his coffee and had pastries ready for them.

Though the food smelled delicious, Harry could hardly taste it. He picked at his breakfast slowly, eyes on the stairwell, waiting for someone to arrive with news. His eyes felt heavy, but at the same time, he knew he could not sleep. Every time he closed them, he remembered the evenings events — his mother falling, the curse spreading across his father’s face, Cedric bleeding out, Bellatrix’s laugh, Voldemort’s rage, the prophecy shattering….

“‘It was all a waste,’” Harry said, dropping his croissant and pressing his hands to his forehead. “All of it. I couldn’t help Snape, Mum and Dad didn’t help me — the prophecy’s gone — all of it was for nothing.”

Sirius set down his coffee and reached a comforting hand out to Harry’s arm. “Hey, it wasn’t for nothing. We caught quite a few Death Eaters, including Malfoy, who’s been eluding the Ministry for years. That’s a lot. And don’t forget, Voldemort showed up at the Ministry tonight. That’s what the Order’s been waiting for — Voldemort to put himself in the open. This certainly isn’t how we wanted it to happen, but —”

The cafe door opened and Harry’s heart leapt into his throat. It was not a Healer with news, nor one of his parents, but it was almost as good. Remus Lupin stepped into the cafe.

Harry and Sirius both jumped to their feet. Remus did not seem to notice them until Harry rushed forward and hugged him.
“Harry — Sirius, you’re alright.” He smiled warmly and squeezed Harry once before letting go.

Harry stepped aside so Sirius and Remus could hug — but they didn’t, and Harry didn’t understand why the few feet between Remus and Sirius felt so wide suddenly. But Harry had other things on his mind.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said to Remus. “You are okay, aren’t you?”

“Just a few bruises — including my ego.” Remus’s smile was a bit embarrassed. “I always thought I was a better duelist than Bellatrix Lestrange, but I guess even I have a few things to learn.”

“You are still better than her,” Sirius said. “She just got lucky. You could’ve suffered a lot worse.”

“I should pay better attention to my footing in the future, I suppose.”

“Is everyone else okay?” Harry asked.

“Your friends are fine,” Remus said. “They’re in a ward downstairs until Dumbledore comes to take them back to Hogwarts.”

Harry wanted to ask about his parents, but he was afraid of the answer.

Sirius, whether he shared such fears or not, asked, “Any word on James and Lily? And Tonks — she was still down when I left —”

“Tonks is recovering. She and Lily were hit with similar spells from Bellatrix, so I expect good news about Lily shortly. I… haven’t heard about James yet.” Remus’s eyes flicked to Harry, and though there was only worry in them, Harry felt guilt turn his stomach over. His dad might not make it… and it was Harry’s fault.

“Well,” Sirius said, “sit, eat something.”

“I meant only to grab a coffee, then go wait to make sure Tonks wakes up.”

“We’ll go with you.” Harry said quickly. If Tonks was hit with something like Lily was, Lily should end up in the same ward.

Sirius seemed to hesitate, then said, “Sure, I’d like to know she’s okay.”

Remus made Harry finish eating breakfast before they went downstairs, coffees in hand, then he led them down to the fourth floor, to a room with a plaque on the door that read:

Wang Shunhua Ward

Curse Counters

Healer-in-Charge: Septimus Heptides VII

Trainee Healer: Vanita Gaye

This ward, like the one Harry had visited at Christmas, was lit with glowing spheres, almost like clusters of bubbles, hanging from the ceiling and gathered in corners of the room. There were four beds in here, only two occupied. In the first was Minerva McGonagall, lying flat on her back, almost as if she had not moved an inch since she had been Stunne. Harry could see the rise and fall of her chest, though, and felt uncomfortable at the sight of her sleeping. She was his professor, and it felt odd to see her vulnerable like this.
In the other bed was Tonks. Her hair was dark brown, and Harry thought her usually soft features were more striking while she slept; her nose was larger than he was used to, as if she scrunched it up while she was awake. She certainly looked more like a Black while she was asleep.

Remus sat down in a chair by Tonks’s bedside, and Sirius pulled two more over for him and Harry.

Harry still felt so many questions crowding his head. He looked between Sirius and Remus, wondering if he should voice them now. Sirius had said to wait for his parents, but Harry didn’t want to wait. Even as a frown slowly deepened on Sirius’s face, like he was lost in a string of unpleasant thoughts, Harry decided he had to ask.

“But why did Voldemort put so much work into luring me down to the Department of Mysteries?” he blurted suddenly. “What was in that prophecy that was so important? And what happened to me tonight — Voldemort was….” Harry had been about to say, “in my head,” but he found the words didn’t quite explain the horror of what had happened. He settled on, “I don’t want it to happen again.”

Remus glanced at Sirius, but Sirius was too busy glowering at a nearby chair to respond.

“You know you have a connection to Voldemort,” Remus said, in a gentle voice.

“This was different!” Usually Harry appreciated Remus’s perspective, but this felt placating, like Remus was skirting a bigger problem. That was not like Remus, and it only made Harry angrier.

“This wasn’t like my dreams, or visions, or whatever — this was… worse. It was horrible — I —”

“It won’t happen again,” Sirius said, without looking at Harry nor Remus.

“But how do you know?!”

Before Sirius could answer, the door to the ward opened and Harry, Remus, and Sirius all stood. A witch in lime green robes pushed in a wicker chair that carried Lily. Lily looked pale, and her eyes were half-open. She was exhausted, weak, not unlike she had been the night the dementors had attacked. But when she saw Harry, her eyes seemed to spark with life. The Healer gasped in shock as Lily stood and rushed to embrace Harry.

Harry felt her weight sag against him, like she wasn’t quite ready to stand on her own yet, but he didn’t care. He squeezed her back like his life depended on it —

“Oh — Harry, not too tight,” she whispered suddenly, and then the Healer was pulling her away from Harry and back into the wheelchair.

“Goodness! I just finished telling you to be careful.” The Healer introduced herself as Vanita Gaye as she helped Lily into one of the beds. Harry stood nearby, awkwardly, wanting to help but unsure what to do.

“I take it you’re her son?” Vanita Gaye said. When Harry nodded, she said, “You’ll need to make sure your mother gets plenty of sleep, and avoids any strenuous activity for a few weeks, and I would suggest limiting spicy foods for a while to prevent a flare up.”

Harry was suddenly overwhelmed by his age — he was fifteen, and this Healer was entrusting his mother’s care to him. He wanted to protest somehow, he wasn’t ready for this sort of thing, but then Sirius was there with a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll see to her,” Sirius said.
Vanita frowned. “And you are…?”

“Her brother-in-law.”

That seemed acceptable to the Healer. She turned to Lily and said, “Don’t overexert yourself,” in a stern voice that reminded Harry of a younger Madam Pomfrey.

“Is there any news on James?” Lily asked.

“Healer Heptides is still working on Mr. Potter,” Vanita said. “If anyone can save him, he can.”

She said it as matter-of-factly as possible, the way the Welcome Witch had spoken earlier. It did not make promises, and it did not ease Harry’s guilt.

When she was gone, Lily pulled Harry closer to her. “You are alright? Truly?”

“Yeah.”

She pressed her hand to his cheek. “You’re so pale…. Have you slept at all?” Her eyes roved over Sirius and Remus. “Any of you?”

No one answered. She looked concerned, but she did not admonish any of them. Harry remembered his earlier thoughts of Sirius waiting up all night for news during the first war. He supposed it must have been the same for Lily, and for Remus.

She closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall. “I could use a coffee.”

“If you need rest,” said Remus, “you should take it.”

“Not until I know James is okay.” Her voice was so sharp, so stubborn, Harry knew there would be no reasoning with her.

They all kept their eyes on the door, as if news would come immediately. It did not, however, and Remus returned to his seat at Tonks’s bedside. Sirius moved his chair so he was nearer to Lily, and Harry stayed perched on the edge of Lily’s bed. She seemed afraid to let him go, and he was not keen on leaving her either.

“Sirius,” Harry started, “you still haven’t told me what happened to me tonight.”

“I think I said it was best for your parents to answer that question.”

Lily frowned. “What do you mean? What happened to you tonight? Your vision of Snape?”

“Voldemort was in my head — not like my vision — it was worse — it hurt — it was awful —”

“Voldemort possessed him,” Sirius said.

Lily’s eyes widened in disbelief, and Remus frowned.

“But —” Lily looked like she was scrambling for words, and her grip on Harry’s hand tightened. “But Dumbledore said — he said it couldn’t.”

“It didn’t work,” Sirius said. He kept his eyes on the floor. “Or at least — it didn’t take.”

“Why could he do it at all?” Harry asked. “Why are you so sure he won’t do it again — I don’t understand why I have this connection, the scar, everything! If you’d told me before —”
“You know why we can’t tell you,” Lily said, in that same gentle, placating voice Remus had used earlier. Harry’s temper flared, and he opened his mouth to demand answers anyway, but Sirius spoke first.

“Dumbledore said it’s time.” He finally looked at Lily, and Lily seemed to deflate into her bed.

“Oh,” was all she said.

Harry looked between Sirius and his mother, unsure which one to press for answers. “I need to know — If Voldemort tries something like this again —”

“He won’t,” said Sirius.

“Could we wait for your father?” asked Lily. “Or — or maybe Dumbledore should be here….”

“I’m not waiting for Dumbledore!” Harry felt his temper flare, as it had in Grimmauld Place when she’d denied his questions about the Order, as it had while he sat in the Room of Requirement and she’d denied him the choice of Hogwarts or Headquarters. “If I’d known about all this beforehand, Voldemort wouldn’t —”

Lily squeezed his hand. “Okay — I’m sorry. I… I just… I’m not sure where to start.”

“Perhaps you should start at the beginning,” Remus suggested quietly.

Lily closed her eyes. “I’m not even sure where the beginning is.” She laughed weakly, like she had in the courtrooms when she’d defended Harry against Fudge’s contrived accusations. Then, Harry had thought her laugh was false, meant to inspire pity from the judges, meant to conceal her natural defiance. Harry did not think there was anything false in it now.

She took in one more deep breath, then said, “I suppose it was just before Christmas when I found out I was pregnant.” She opened her eyes but kept them on the ceiling as she spoke, as if she were watching something far above her. “Yes, it was Christmas, because we told Sirius and Peter then. And Remus, but that — well — We didn’t tell anyone else in the Order. Not until January. The Longbottoms knew, though. Because Alice was pregnant at the same time. You and Neville are only a day apart, you know…. But it was January, definitely January, because it was right before my birthday, when we told the Order. Your father and I were so happy — scared, of course — but so thrilled you were coming. It wasn’t even a month later that Dumbledore came to us and told us that Voldemort wanted to hurt you, and your father and I had to go into hiding.”

Harry tried to keep his voice even, but he felt as if his questions burst out of him. “But I wasn’t even born yet. Why would Voldemort want to kill me before I was even born?”

Lily looked to Sirius again, but Sirius said nothing.

Finally, she answered him. “Because of the prophecy.”

“The one I saw in Snape’s memories?”

“Yes.” Lily frowned. “I know I — I got very upset with you when you told me about it, and I am sorry, Harry. I was so scared, for you and for Severus that I — I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lost my temper —”

“I… I think deserved it.” Harry looked down at the bed, where his hand was still intertwined with his mother’s. “If I hadn’t looked in the Pensieve, Voldemort wouldn’t have taken him tonight.” He had felt so justified in the moment, driven by his need for answers, driven by Regulus’s suspicion
of Snape. Just as he had felt tonight, as if there were no real choice before him.

Lily squeezed his hand, but her grip was weaker than Harry remembered from other nights of hard conversations like this. He hoped it was only that she was tired and not that she was in pain.

“I don’t know how Voldemort learned of the prophecy,” she continued, “but he told Snape what he knew, that he believed the prophecy was about you, our unborn child. Snape going to Dumbledore is what saved our lives. He told Dumbledore that Voldemort was sure the prophecy was about us, about you.”

Harry realized that his family had no idea that it was Snape who had told Voldemort the prophecy in the first place. He thought he should say something, but he didn’t know how Sirius, who already disliked Snape, would react, so he thought it best not to mention it now.

“What was the prophecy?” Harry asked. “And if Voldemort had already heard it, why did he need me to go to the Ministry to get it for him?”

Lily let out a deep breath and rubbed her temple. “Whatever source Voldemort got the prophecy from only heard a portion of it. He knew enough to decide that you were a threat to him, so your father and I went into hiding to keep you safe. That’s when we left home. Your father forced the house-elves to leave, and we went and stayed with different friends for awhile, found safehouses where we could, but we couldn’t stay anywhere very long. It was alright for a short time, but then you came along, and you were starting to get bigger, and moving so much was more difficult. We needed a solution that allowed us to settle down. Dumbledore suggested the Fidelius Charm. We knew immediately that Sirius was the one we trusted most to keep us safe. We’d already named him your godfather, he was your father’s best friend, it made sense. When we told Sirius the plan, though, he made a very good argument — everyone knew Sirius was your father’s best friend, even Voldemort and his followers. So Sirius suggested we use Peter Pettigrew.”

“I know this part already. Peter betrayed you guys, told Voldemort where you were, and then died to save you. Dumbledore told me that Peter’s death is the reason Voldemort couldn’t kill me.”

“Peter made a choice to stand and fight instead of stand aside. That’s a powerful magic, to decide to give your life for someone else’s, and it protected you. It’s also how you got your scar.”

Harry resisted the urge to rub his forehead. “But why does it hurt all the time?”

“You already know that, too. You’re connected to Voldemort.”

“But why?”

Lily paused. “When Dumbledore asked your father and I to go into hiding to protect you, we didn’t question it. We trusted Dumbledore’s judgement. After Peter had died, and Voldemort was gone, and Sirius was out of Azkaban, Dumbledore told your father, Sirius, and I the prophecy.”

“So it’s not lost? You know what it says? You’ve known this whole time?”

She closed her eyes. “Yes.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Well… I suppose we should tell you now. I’m afraid I remember it word for word, I’ve thought about it so often over the years….” Without opening her eyes, she sighed and said, “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches… Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies… and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have
power the Dark Lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives….” Lily wiped a single tear from her cheek as she finished speaking.

“So… it’s about me?”

“Voldemort decided it was you.” Her voice cracked, but Harry knew her well enough to hear anger in it as well as sorrow. “The baby born in late July, to those who had defied Voldemort three times — it could have been Alice’s child as well as mine.” Lily opened her eyes again, and she tried and failed to blink back tears.

“Could have been? So it isn’t Neville?”

Lily let out a long breath. “The reason Dumbledore told us the prophecy is because he was certain it was truly about you.”

“How could he have known? What if —”

“Because of your scar. The prophecy said that Voldemort would ‘mark him as his equal.’ Because Voldemort gave you that scar, because Voldemort gave you that connection to him, the prophecy is about you.”

“But what if Voldemort chose wrong? Why wouldn’t he wait to see if Neville or I grew up more powerful?”

“He didn’t know that part of the prophecy. He was only told the first part, that spoke of a boy who who could defeat him. He didn’t know that attacking you would transfer power to you.”

“I don’t have any special power…. I’m certainly not more powerful than you or Dad, or Sirius or Remus —”

“You already know the answer to that, Harry. Dumbledore told you, after the first time you faced Voldemort.”

Harry frowned, trying to remember that conversation from four years ago, “Love? But Peter’s sacrifice doesn’t protect me anymore — because he used my blood — Voldemort can touch me, ever since he came back in the graveyard —”

“Love isn’t in blood, Harry. Blood doesn’t matter — what happened tonight, the thing that saved you, that was love. We were worried Voldemort would try to possess you, but we also hoped it would be almost impossible for him to do so.”

“If he could do it this whole time, why did he wait until tonight? Why not while I was at Hogwarts, or at Headquarters?”

“Tonight was his last attempt to kill you,” Sirius said, finally breaking his silence. “I had the… unfortunate pleasure of being the first one up in the Atrium, just in time to watch it happen. Voldemort possessed you, hoping Dumbledore might try to kill him by killing you. You told your Dad and Remus about feeling Voldemort inside you the night he tried to kill Arthur Weasley, right? That’s about the time we decided Occlumency was the next step to protect you.”

“But Occlumency didn’t work. I’m no good at it. None of Snape’s lessons helped…. That’s the whole reason we… It’s why Dad’s —” Harry couldn’t bring himself to finish that thought, so he chose a different one. “Couldn’t Voldemort possess me right now, then?”

“Doubtful,” Sirius said. “You said it hurt, didn’t it?”
Harry shivered at the memory, and squeezed his mother’s hand, despite his frustration with her. “Yes… worse than the Cruciatus Curse.”

Lily squeezed his hand back. “What was it that made it stop?”

“I… I remembered you. It hurt so badly that I wanted to die, but I remembered you — all of you, and Dad, too.”

“That love is what drove him out,” said Sirius. “Voldemort can’t stand it. He can’t stand to be that close to you, to put his soul or mind or whatever it really is in the same space as yours. That pain you felt when he first tried is what he felt when you drove him out. I don’t think he’ll be trying again any time soon.”

Harry suddenly felt as if he’d wasted a lot of time on Occlumency and emptying his mind of emotions when all he really had to do was think of his family in order to keep Voldemort out of his head. “Why couldn’t you tell me all this sooner?”

“We wanted to,” said Lily. “We really did. We talked about it, over and over and over…. When you turned eleven, and went off to Hogwarts, we knew you’d hear questions about Voldemort and the war. Sirius thought we should tell you the prophecy then, but your father and I decided to wait until you were seventeen. Then you faced Voldemort at the end of the school year and, well, we rather foolishly hoped that would be it. We talked about it again after you destroyed the diary. Dumbledore said as he always did, that it was up to us, and we thought twelve was too young — we just wanted you to be a boy, to grow up like anyone else. To have friends and play Quidditch and make your own way. And then Voldemort came back… and we were going to tell you, we really were, but Dumbledore asked us not to. We didn’t want Voldemort getting the prophecy out of your mind.”

“Why did that matter? It had already happened. Voldemort already marked me, like you said. Why did it matter if he knew it was his fault or not?”

Lily didn’t answer.

“Because of the end of the prophecy,” said Sirius. “Either must die at the hand of the other…..”

Harry frowned, eyes on his hands, still clasping his mother’s. “For neither can live while the other survives…. So… I’ve got to kill Voldemort, or he’ll kill me?”

“We never wanted you to carry that weight,” Lily said in a rush. “We never wanted you to think it was your duty to kill Voldemort, and we never told anyone else the prophecy because we never wanted anyone to look at you like a weapon to be used against Voldemort. We just wanted you to grow up happy and loved. You’re our son, and that’s always come first for us.”

Harry had always wondered what his scar meant, why his parents were so hesitant to talk about it. A dozen half-finished conversations appeared in a new light. He was angry they’d waited so long to tell him, and hurt that it had all come out this way. He thought of how terrifying this made his future — kill or be killed was not a pleasant thought — and remembered what Firenze said about prophecies. They were for shoring up defenses, not for avoiding. Harry would simply have to prepare himself to face Voldemort and win. It may not be the future his parents had wanted for him, but he thought, prophecy or not, it was inevitable. His parents had taught him to be kind and good, to stand up against evil and those who overpowered the weak, and so of course he would stand against Voldemort, just as they had when they were young. The prophecy did not take away options for his future, it merely confirmed the future his parents had raised him for.
“Did you ever wish it had been Neville and not me?”

Lily hesitated. “Yes. On very bad days. But I’m very proud to have you, scar and prophecy and all. You’re braver, kinder, and fiercer than your father and I ever dreamed. We love you, Harry, and we’re so proud of you.”

She pulled him into a hug, and Harry struggled to hold back the tears that suddenly threatened to burst. Harry squeezed her as tightly as he dared, careful not to put pressure on her ribs. Harry wished his whole family were here, wished everyone were safe, but he was glad to have at least this.

“Now,” Lily pulled out of the hug and wiped her cheeks dry, “I know… I know we made a promise to you that there would be no more secrets, so I don’t blame you if you don’t trust us this time, but I promise you there is nothing else I can tell you. That’s everything we know about Voldemort and the prophecy.”

She waited, and he wasn’t sure if she wanted him to tell her it was okay, or if she was waiting to see if he had any more questions. But he didn’t have any more questions, and he wasn’t going to tell her it was okay. His parents had betrayed his trust, for years, and that hurt. He wasn’t quite ready to forgive them.

Remus stood slowly, stretching as he did. “I think I’m going to get another coffee. Shall I get more than one?”

“I would love a coffee,” Lily said.

“Sirius?” Remus asked.

“Yeah, sure,” said Sirius. “Thanks.”

“Harry, would you help me carry it all back?”

“Can’t you Levitate them?” Sirius asked.

Remus gave them a wry smile. “I find myself short a wand... again. I would appreciate the help.”

Harry, though he was hesitant to leave his mother, to step away when news of his father could come at any moment, saw the out Remus was offering him: a chance to talk about what he’d just learned with someone who wasn’t his mother.

“Sure, I’ll help,” said Harry.

Lily squeezed his hand tighter as he slipped off the edge of her bed, but she did let go. Harry followed Remus outside the ward, and as soon as the door was closed behind them, Remus said, “If you have any questions, or anything you want to talk about —”

“Yeah, actually — did you know the prophecy? You didn’t say anything when they were talking, but you knew, didn’t you?”

Remus seemed surprised by the question, and hesitated to answer. “Yes.”

“But Dumbledore didn’t tell you.”

“No.” Remus pushed open the door to the stairwell, and held it for Harry. “Your parents told me, a few years after you were born.”
“So you kept it from me too.”

Remus was silent as they went up one floor to the cafe and gift shop. It was still quiet this early in the morning, but the sunlight filtering in through the skylight had changed to a pale yellow, and the gift shop was just opening its doors. A pair of Healers had come upstairs to take tea together. Harry wondered if it was the beginning of their shift or the end of their shift.

It wasn’t until Harry and Remus had ordered their coffees and were waiting for the wizard to pour them that Remus spoke again.

“I don’t think your parents ever meant to keep the prophecy from me,” he began in a quiet voice. “I think they took a few years to tell me because they were afraid. I know it might be difficult to imagine — James and Lily are two of the bravest people I’ve ever known — but I think the prophecy terrifies them in a way nothing else has, not even their own death. Your parents — and even Sirius and I — would all give our lives to protect you, because that’s what parents do for their children. It is a much harder thing to ask a parent to risk their child’s life. You’re growing, quickly, certainly, and you’ve faced much more danger than anyone at your age should have, but you are still James and Lily’s child, and you always will be. I don’t think this prophecy would have been any easier to share even if they had waited until you were seventeen, even if all of the events surrounding Voldemort’s return had never happened.”

“But those events did happen,” Harry said. He was used to Remus being the rational one, the peacekeeper, but this time Remus’s words weren’t helping. It was almost more frustrating than any conversation Harry had had with his parents this year. “They did happen and just because it was hard doesn’t mean they shouldn’t have told me.”

“Fear is not an excuse, no,” Remus said quietly. “But it is a reason, and a common reason, that people do foolish things. You’re brave, like James and Lily, but not everyone is. Sometimes, the people we love disappoint us. Sometimes, we even disappoint ourselves. What’s important is that we grow, we forgive our mistakes, and we find new ways to be brave.”

Harry, unable to find a counter argument, grabbed two of the coffees from the counter. Sirius and Lily were hard to argue with because they were so stubborn, but Remus was hard to argue with because he was too honest. Harry knew that Remus must have learned the lesson about forgiving fear during the first war against Voldemort, when Remus and Sirius had been driven apart over suspicion for each other. Harry had never heard Remus nor Sirius speak of it, but he’d heard enough from his father. He supposed, too, there must be a lot of fear wrapped up in being a werewolf — Harry had seen Remus’s boggart take the form of a full moon. For someone who was brave enough to face their own worst fear every month, Harry thought Remus had a good deal of empathy for those less brave than him.

“I want to forgive them, but….” Harry struggled to put all of the feelings inside of him into words. “I put a lot of people in danger tonight — You, and Mum and Dad, and Sirius, and my friends and the rest of the Order — and Snape and Dad are still hurt, and that’s my fault, but if I’d known, if they’d told me the truth, I wouldn’t have made that mistake.”

“If you had known Voldemort could give you false visions, you would have stayed at Hogwarts yesterday? If you had known the prophecy, you wouldn’t have gone down to the Department of Mysteries, to save someone who might be in danger? Even knowing it might risk Voldemort getting his hands on the prophecy?”

Harry remembered his words to Hermione, that he was making the choice he could live with. If he had known that the vision might not be real, what would he have done? He would have checked in with the Order, he would have made sure Snape was not at Hogwarts — all things he did yesterday
before leaving Hogwarts.

“I… I don’t know.”

“No, there is no sense in reliving our mistakes. We move forward, and be better.”

Harry struggled to take in Remus’s advice. He wanted to blame his parents, to alleviate some of the guilt he felt, and his anger helped him do that. But Remus’s words made sense, and even though his gut struggled to catch up, it was at least a little easier knowing they could move forward, that last night wasn’t the end of everything.

And then something happened that made everything a lot easier to bear.

The door to the cafe burst open with a loud thud, startling Remus into dropping his hot coffee on the floor.

Sirius, with a triumphant grin on his face, said, “James is okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons always appreciated.
The Second War Begins

Chapter Summary

Harry heads home for the summer. He has a few apologies to make first.

Chapter Notes

Several things to cover in this author's note, so it'll be a bit lengthy. No judgement if you skip on ahead to the chapter.

1) Thank you so much for your patience with this book. I started publishing this book 2 years ago to the day, and I'd actually begun writing it 6 months before that. It's been a long, wonderful journey, and in that time, I've completed my education and become a full-fledged teacher! I started teaching 8th grade just a few weeks ago. It's been a weird adjustment, and I don't really have time to write, at least not right now, so I really can't say when Half-Blood Prince will begin.

2) In the interim between HBP and this book, there are several things you can do to continue your enjoyment of the AU. You can follow me on twitter @HPEveryoneLivesAU for updates on the writing process. We also have an everyone lives au wikia! Magic713 has put together a wiki for the AU, and it's a bit bare bones at the moment, but we're hoping to flesh it out over the year.

3) My other major project is a podcast called @DrawnOutCast, a Disney nostalgia podcast, where my friend Brooke and I watch Disney movies and put them in their historical context and evaluate them in a modern context. It's a lot of fun, especially if you love Disney and fairy tales. Drawn Out Cast is on Itunes, Spotify, GooglePlay, and Podbean. And, small but fun thing, I was also a guest on a Pushing Daisies podcast called Plucking Daisies! They're @pluckdaisiespod on Twitter and you can find them on Itunes and Podbean as well.

4) Again, thank you so much for your patience with this chapter. Between my beta ageofzero moving across states and me starting a new job it's been crazy trying to finish up this segment of the AU. I spent about an hour before bed each night rereading the AU to get ready to reread Half-Blood Prince, and it's also made me very excited for this final chapter of Order of the Phoenix. It ties up a lot of loose ends, has a lot of much needed conversations, and I think you'll enjoy it. It's nearly as long as Runaway Bunny, but it is fairly episodic, so it has easy breaking points between conversations if you need to stop and come back to it.

So! Happy Christmas, thanks for listening to me and for reading this fic. It's an absolute treasure to be able to share this story with all of you. I've had so much fun writing it, and I hope you have half that much fun reading it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Healer Septimus Heptides VII was an elderly man with white hair that stuck out all over his head, and a ready smile. He spoke with a deep, rumbling voice and reminded Harry, just a little bit, of Dumbledore.

“Never seen a curse like it,” he was saying to Lily and James as Harry returned with Remus, Sirius, and fresh coffees. “At least, never on someone still alive. A miracle you weren’t dead before you hit the ground.”

“He’s got a thick skull.” Sirius said with a grin, and took a sip of his coffee. “Takes a lot to get through to him.”

James grinned back. “Thanks, mate.”

James’s head was still swathed in bandages, covering most of the left side of his face, where the curse had struck him and spread. He looked alright though, with his usual, carefree smile spread across his face, pushing against the bandages.

Lily had left her bed to sit on the end of James’s bed. She looked up at Healer Heptides with a frown. “He really is alright? What are the bandages for?”

“Ahh, well, I wasn’t able to counter all of the curse’s damage, unfortunately. I did quite well for your face — no marks on the skin, and no cracks in your bones — but I’m afraid your left eye is irreparable. There are options for replacement, if you would like to sit down and discuss them, but perhaps at a later time, after you’ve rested properly.”

James took a moment to process the information. His fingers touched the bandage, as if they might contradict what the Healer had just said. Lily squeezed his hand and bit down on her lip. Harry felt his stomach turn — this was his fault.

“Well,” James said, “as long as I don’t turn out like Mad-Eye, I think I’ll manage.”

The joke was funny; even Remus could not resist a weak laugh. It did not abate Harry’s guilt.

“Mrs. Potter,” the Healer said, “I trust my Trainee treated you well?”

“Yes. She warned me off of acidic foods for a while, and said my ribs would be tender for a few days.”

“Excellent. I’ll leave you, then. You know how to get a hold of me if there is any change. Do rest, all of you.” His gaze passed over Remus, Sirius, and Harry, as if he knew they’d all been awake all night.

Sirius stopped Heptides at the door, and Harry caught only pieces of a conversation that he did not think would be intelligible even if he had heard the whole thing. Sirius asked about, “cranial hemorrhaging” and if Healer Heptum had knowledge of “Claraluxal,” none of which meant anything to Harry.

James motioned Harry to the bed, to sit beside Lily. “C’mere, Snitch, let me see you’re really alright.”

Harry, glad as he was to know his father was alive, approached the bed with leaden feet. “Dad — I’m sorry —”
“Hey, no, don’t apologize.” James pulled Harry into a tight hug. “A lot went wrong today, and I’m sorry you got the worst of it.”

“But — I didn’t — I’m fine — you’re — and Snape’s still —”

James looked up at Remus. “We still don’t have word on Snape?”

Remus shook his head.

“Dumbledore’ll figure it out.” James’s voice faltered even as he said it. “Is everyone else alright?”

“Yes,” said Remus. “Dumbledore arrived, rounded up most of Voldemort’s Death Eaters — including Malfoy.”

“Excellent.”

“And The Ministry saw Voldemort. They’ve changed their tune very quickly.”

“Brilliant.”

“And,” said Lily in a quiet voice, “we’ve told Harry everything.”

James frowned, then tightened his hug. “Good. I hated having to keep secrets from you. Are you alright, Harry? Really alright?”

Harry broke the hug and tried to look at his father, but found it hard to meet his gaze. He was still angry with his parents, and now angry with himself for what had happened to his father, and guilty about all of it. But when he thought about the prophecy itself, that didn’t upset him as much as it could have. He would face Voldemort. That seemed inevitable, prophecy or not.

“I think so,” Harry said. “I still wish you’d told me sooner.”

“I know. I do too, but Dumbledore asked us —”

“Dumbledore isn’t my dad!”

James pressed his lips into a thin line and looked to Lily for help. She, though, kept her eyes on the floor, appearing at least as guilty as Harry felt.

“You’re right, Harry,” James sighed. “We’re your parents, and it was our decision in the end. We just wanted you to be safe.”

“But I wasn’t! Voldemort still manipulated me — he still possessed me, prophecy or not —”

“He — what?”

“He’s fine,” Lily said quickly. “It didn’t hold — Voldemort won’t touch Harry again.”

James relaxed into the bed. He looked exhausted, and Harry felt bad for arguing. He remembered the promise he’d made months ago to stop losing his temper on his parents. Tonight had just been so long and difficult….

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean —”

James waved off the apology. “We all made choices this year, and choices tonight. We did what we thought was right. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you sooner. It’s our job to be your parents, not
Dumbledore’s, and we forgot that.”

Lily kept one hand on James’s and reached her other out to Harry. “I’m sorry, too. We won’t let it happen again. No more secrets, no matter what Dumbledore says.”

Harry was grateful for their apology, but it still hurt. He wanted to forgive his parents, truly, but it felt as if they’d had this conversation so many times before. There were so many secrets, so many promises — it was hard to believe them now. Still, he wanted to believe them, and wanting to believe them helped.

He took his mother’s hand.

She smiled, but there were still tears in the corners of her eyes.

Sirius returned, and he looked glad to see Lily, James, and Harry at peace with each other.

“I take it you don’t know more than the Healer?” James asked Sirius.

“I still might. He was pretty up to snuff though. Didn’t do anything I wouldn’t have done in his place.”

Harry asked, “Sirius, why did you never become a Healer? If you’re really as good as he is, shouldn’t you?”

Sirius shrugged. “I’d talked to McGonagall about it when we discussed careers. I knew I was good at it, though she wasn’t sure I had the discipline. And she was right, there’s a lot more schooling to do after Hogwarts. Would’ve bored me to death.”

“Would you teach me some?”

Sirius looked surprised. “You sure? It’s a lot of work.”

Harry thought of the number of times he’d been hurt, or how helpful he could have been tonight if he had at least been able to treat his dad right away, or helped Neville’s broken nose, or Ginny’s ankle. If he truly was going to continue to face Voldemort until one of them died, he wanted to be able to help anyone who might be caught in the crossfire. “Yeah, I really do want to —”

The door to the hospital wing burst open, and Harry was ambushed suddenly in a tight hug.

“You’re alright — you really are!”

Harry managed to pull himself out of Ginny Weasley’s arms and couldn’t help but grin at her. “Yeah — I’m alright. You alright?”

Her immediate excitement seemed to compose itself as he smiled at her. “Yeah. I saw you running after Bellatrix Lestrange and I thought for sure she’d kill you.”

“Nah, just a bump or two.” Harry looked over her shoulder and saw Luna and Neville in the doorway. “I’m glad you guys are okay. Where’s everyone else?”

“A ward down the hall. The Healer came to check on us and she mentioned you were here.”

Harry looked to his parents, but he didn’t even need to ask.

“Go on,” Lily said. “We’ll be right here.”
“And you’re all okay, too?” Neville asked in a quiet voice.

“Yeah, we’re alright.” James said. “You guys did good today. You should be proud. I’m sure your parents are.”

Neville turned bright red, stammered out a thank you, and disappeared back into the hall.

Ginny, Luna, and Neville led Harry around a corner and into the Ellis Bergen Ward. This room was illuminated with the same clusters of glowing glass bubbles, but it felt warmer than the previous ward. Here, the walls were a mint green, and teddy bears with balloons bobbed up and down, charmed into the paint. When Harry had been to the hospital as a child, he’d visited the third floor, and he remembered that room looking vaguely like this one.

There were four beds in this room, all full. Hermione was asleep in one; the bed beside hers was Ron’s. He was sitting up, but he still looked pale and queasy. Cedric was asleep in another, and Amber in the bed beside him. Pearl sat in a chair between them. She smiled and waved at Harry as he walked in, but did not leave her sister’s side. Harry noticed the makeshift bandage Amber had used on Pearl’s wrist was gone, and she no longer looked to be in any pain.

Ron grinned at Harry. “Mate — you’re here —”

Just seeing Ron smile almost pushed Harry to tears. He’d been so worried about his friends, about everyone, and knowing they were alright was as overwhelming as worrying about them.

But he didn’t cry. He laughed. “Yeah, I’m here. You alright?”

“Yeah.” Ron made a face. “Remember that time I tried to make Malfoy eat slugs? I feel like that. But that’s better than it could be, I guess.” The freckles on Ron’s arms were interrupted by thick red abrasions where the tentacles had wrapped around him, but his head seemed clear and there was no black goop trickling from his mouth. “They said Hermione’ll be alright. Whatever they did messed her up inside real bad, and they’re giving her different potions every hour it seems. But sleeping’s supposed to be good for her.”

“Is Amber alright?”

“Yes,” Pearl answered. “Something happened to her lungs — a bad combination of curses, the Healer said — but she’s alright. They want her to sleep to keep her breathing slower for a while. Cedric’s alright, too, but he lost a lot of blood.”

Harry felt an apology climb into his throat. He wanted to say he was sorry, this was his fault, they never should have come with him to the Ministry. He hardly even knew Pearl and Amber outside of Quidditch games and the D.A., and Luna had barely been a friend before this year, and they’d all risked so much for him — but then Luna put a hand on his arm. She looked up at him with her usual half-aware smile.

“See? Everyone’s alright. You don’t have to be sad.”

“I’m not sad, I’m….” But he didn’t really know what he was.

“What happened, Harry?” Ron asked. “I mean, I remember we got separated in the Hall of Prophecy… and then there was a big black room — everything’s sort of fuzzy after that.”

Harry took a chair between Ron and Hermione, while Ginny sat on Ron’s bed. Neville and Luna pulled chairs over as well. Luna told Ron about the duel in the room with the planets. Harry and Neville told them all what had happened in the room with the mysterious veil, and Harry told them
about the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort. He did not tell them he’d been possessed — maybe he would tell Ron and Hermione later — but he did tell them what he’d learned from Sirius about his vision of Snape.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “It wasn’t real — or, it was, but it was a trap anyway, and Snape wasn’t even there. I played right into Voldemort’s hands.”

“You’d’ve done the same if it was us,” said Neville.

“Shame the prophecy broke, though,” said Ron. “Would’ve been nice to know what it said.”

“Oh… yeah, I guess.” Harry was glad Hermione was asleep. She, surely, would have been able to read his hesitation and know that he had indeed heard the prophecy. He was not quite ready to tell his friends about his looming destiny. He realized, suddenly, this must be how his parents had felt for all those years, and he felt like he understood Remus’s words a bit better.

“Are you coming back to Hogwarts with us?” asked Ginny. “The Healer said Dumbledore would be coming to take us soon.”

“Surprised we aren’t expelled, honestly,” said Pearl. “What we did was really reckless.”

Ron laughed. “At this point, I’m not sure what it would take for Dumbledore to expel us. He might strip me and Hermione of our prefect badges, though….” Ron seemed to pale even more as the thought struck him. “Mum would have a fit.”

Harry hadn’t even considered going back to Hogwarts. Last year, after everything that had happened at the Triwizard Tournament, he had been so grateful to just go home with his parents, to get away from it all. This year, though, he felt compelled to stay with his friends. He wanted to see everyone from the D.A., he wanted to be there when Hermione woke up, he wanted to return to a Hogwarts without Umbridge.

“I’d have to ask —”

The doors to the ward opened, and a elderly woman led in Professor Dumbledore.

Dumbledore smiled at them all. “Glad to see you are all feeling better.” His eyes seemed to linger on Harry, as if he was searching for any sign of discomfort. “I will happily return you to school, if you are ready to go. Just give Healer Keane a moment to ready Miss Granger, Miss Lais, and Mr. Diggory.”

“Er — sir?” Harry said. “Am I going back to Hogwarts, too?”

“Your parents quite loudly and formally removed you from Hogwarts yesterday. They did not make any indication when I spoke with them just now that they planned to change that, but perhaps it merely slipped their mind. Do you want to return to Hogwarts?”

“Er — I think so. Is it alright with you if I went back to Hogwarts?”

Though Dumbledore looked more tired than Harry had ever seen him, he still smiled. “For as long as you wish to return to Hogwarts, you are welcome there. I would recommend, however, you receive your parents’ approval first.”

Harry had not noticed how heavy the weight in his chest was until it lifted. He had not realized, amidst all his anger with his parents and anger with himself, that he had been afraid of Dumbledore’s disappointment. He’d been so worried that Dumbledore would be angry with him
for putting Snape in danger, for leaving Hogwarts, for almost letting Voldemort get his hands on the prophecy. But it seemed that Dumbledore had, at least for the moment, no words of reprimand.

“Thanks,” Harry paused at the doorway and turned back. “Sir — could I also ask — is Snape alright?”

“Professor Snape will be just fine.”

It was as if the final knot in Harry’s chest loosened and he could breathe again. He even felt a smile creep its way onto his face as he left the Ellis Bergen Ward. Everyone was alright in the end.

Harry’s relief faltered, though, only a few steps into the hallway. He could hear Sirius and Remus standing outside the door, speaking in hushed tones. As he rounded the corner, he noticed they looked upset with each other in a way Harry had never seen before. Sirius’ shoulders were drawn up, his face pulled into a frown that didn’t seem far from a snarl. It was both defensive and vicious. Remus, for his part, would not look at Sirius, and though he wasn’t frowning, Harry could see his shoulders were tensed, almost as if he were prepared to fight.

“It’s not a question of want to —” Remus’s voice rose as he snapped at Sirius.

“You don’t have to do it either,” Sirius snarled back.

Harry froze mid-step. They hadn’t seen him yet, and he was afraid to interrupt.

“You’re doing it again,” Sirius continued, “you’re running —”

“I’m not running from anything. Dumbledore’s asked —”

“Hippogriff shit, you’re running! You’re scared, and you’re running!”

“Someone has to do this, and I’m the only one that can.”

Sirius’s nostrils flared. “At least take your wand. I know you don’t like that spare, but it’s still yours —”

Remus shook his head. “I’ll be more effective without it.”

“You won’t say goodbye to her either, will you?”

“To what end, Sirius? Really, it would only — Ah, Harry. Everything alright?”

Harry watched Remus’s posture change from cornered to at ease so quickly that if he had blinked he might have missed it. Whatever it was Sirius and Remus were fighting about, it was locked away for another time. Sirius had a harder time reining in his temper.

“I’m alright,” Harry said slowly. “Are you two alright?”

“Fine,” Remus answered.

Sirius did not look fine.

“I’m actually glad you’re here, Harry,” said Remus. “I’ll be traveling for Dumbledore this summer, and was hoping to say goodbye before I left.”

“You’re leaving? Already? But why? What’s so urgent — Mum and Dad aren’t even out of the hospital —”
“We need to move before Voldemort does. Dumbledore has asked me to reach out to the werewolf community and win their support before Greyback can. It could take time, and the sooner I start, the better.”

Harry was not sure he could think of a more dangerous task. He’d seen Fenrir Greyback’s face all over the Daily Prophet and plastered in Hogsmeade windows alongside other Death Eaters’ wanted posters. If that danger could not dissuade Remus, Harry was not sure anything could, not even Sirius.

“How will you even find them?” Harry asked.

“There’s a woman who was in the waiting room this morning. She told the Welcome Witch she had a bad case of Cauldron Cough. More likely, she was just interested in a warm place to sleep. I thought I’d start with her.”

Harry hardly remembered the woman from the waiting room, with her ragged clothes and dramatic cough. He would never have thought she was a werewolf, but perhaps Remus had noticed something else about her.

“When will you come home?”

“When the job is done.”

Sirius snorted, like he did not believe that answer. Or perhaps he just didn’t like it. Harry didn’t like it either, but he didn’t know what else to say.

“Trust your parents, this summer, Harry,” said Remus, “and do be careful.”

“Yeah. You too.” And Harry hugged Remus goodbye.

Harry waited for Remus and Sirius to also hug goodbye, but Sirius’s arms remained folded over his chest. Remus did not linger. Harry watched as the second war drove a second rift between Remus and Sirius, and the divide felt tangible as Remus left the hall.

“What were you guys really fighting about?” Harry knew them well enough to know Sirius would not have begged Remus to stay just because a mission was dangerous.

“It’s nothing, apparently,” Sirius grumbled bitterly. He seemed to wrestle with his frustration for a moment then asked, “Your friends alright?”

“Yeah. Dumbledore’s taking them back to Hogwarts. I wanted to go.”

“Ah. Better ask your folks.”

James and Lily were, understandably, hesitant to give Harry permission to go back to Hogwarts. Yes, Umbridge was gone and Dumbledore returned, but letting Harry far out of their sight after such a dangerous and traumatic evening made them nervous. Harry reminded them that last year, after the duel with Voldemort in the graveyard, he had gone home, and that had had consequences among the students at Hogwarts, who were left to doubt his story. Things were different this time, of course, but wouldn’t it be better if Harry was there to talk to his friends? And, that aside, wasn’t this what they’d actually wanted? Lily had just told him she had always wanted him to grow up like anyone else — didn’t that mean going back to school with his friends?

Lily did not look pleased to have her words used against her. “I did say that, but this is — I’m worried. It could be dangerous.”
“I promise I’ll stay at Hogwarts, and Dumbledore will be there.”

“The alternative,” James said in a tired voice, “is that he goes home with Sirius, who will be back and forth between Headquarters, and he’ll mostly be alone with the house-elves while we’re here. Or he goes to Headquarters, and stays with Sirius and Regulus.”

Lily chewed on her lower lip. “I don’t imagine we’ll be here much longer, but…. Alright, fine. You can go to Hogwarts. That does sound like the best option.”

Harry hugged each of his parents, again promised to be safe and careful, said goodbye to Sirius, and returned to the ward down the hall.

Dumbledore smiled at him as he entered. “Ah, Harry, has your request been approved?”

“Yeah — er, yes, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Shall we return to school then?”

Dumbledore had arranged for them to travel by portkey to Madam Pomfrey’s. Two Healers helped transport Amber, Hermione, and Cedric, and upon their arrival at Hogwarts, those Healers explained to Madam Pomfrey how they had treated each of the children. Madam Pomfrey listened, but insisted on doing her own examination of each student. When she examined Harry and found the knot on the back of his head, she gave him a small tablet that felt cold and minty, and he found his headache lessened a bit.

Harry was released to his dorm, along with Ginny and Neville. Ron was to be kept to see if Madam Pomfrey could do more for the scars on his arm and for further observation. Amber, Cedric, and Hermione also needed further observation and lots of rest. Luna returned to the Ravenclaw dormitory, and Pearl to the Hufflepuff dorms.

Harry followed Neville and Ginny upstairs in a sort of haze. He’d been awake all night, and the last twelve hours or so had been emotionally taxing in a way he hadn’t experienced before. He was worn thin, relieved everyone was alright, but apprehensive about what the future had in store.

A great prophecy had been laid on him, a responsibility to save the Wizarding World he’d grown up in. Remus, too had taken on a dangerous task that Harry didn’t fully understand, but the fear he’d seen in his family tonight was something he understood too well. Even though they had all survived tonight, there was no promise they would survive the next battle.

As Harry entered the common room with Ginny and Neville, he paused.

It was Friday morning, and only a trio of seventh years were awake, cramming for their last N.E.W.T., along with Sophie Roper and Sally-Anne Perks, who also had their Muggle Studies exam that afternoon. Most only glanced at the trio then returned to their studies. Sally-Anne gave them a confused look, but she didn’t ask where they had been.

Harry found it strange that life at Hogwarts had continued, unimpeded by everything that had happened at the Ministry of Magic. He supposed it must, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that it shouldn’t, that everything was different now, and the world should not run on as it had been. Then again, it was not as if a great prophecy had been laid on Hogwarts or its students — this was a burden Harry alone had to carry.

“Alright, Harry?” Ginny asked, and he realized Neville had already disappeared up the dormitory steps. Ginny, however, had noticed his hesitation and come back.
“Yeah, it’s just… I don’t know, I thought it would be different. But I guess that’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not. You’re different, so you want it to feel different, but it doesn’t. It won’t.”

Harry remembered the one and only time Ginny had been sharp with him, in a bedroom in Grimmauld Place. “Is that how you felt? After the Chamber of Secrets?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Home was so… normal. I didn’t like it. It felt really good to go to Egypt that summer, though, helped things feel different enough that it was okay. And then, eventually, you’ll feel okay that it’s not different.”

Harry remembered how abnormal life had felt after Voldemort’s return and the trauma of the graveyard. His parents had treated him differently, they’d left home more often than usual, there had been house-elves at home — it had made managing his pain a bit easier, knowing that the world around him recognized it. Now, he wasn’t sure what he would do.

“It’ll be different soon, though,” Ginny said, and looked out the window. “The Daily Prophet will get here, and everyone will know there’s a war on. It won’t feel this way for long.”

Harry was not sure if her comment was supposed to be a relief or not. Judging by the concerned expression on her face, it seemed even she wasn’t sure. But he was at least sure that she was right. Everything would be different, and not just for Hogwarts, but for the whole Wizarding World.

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As Ginny had predicted, Hogwarts did change. The Daily Prophet came, with a hastily put together front page. Harry Potter vindicated, Albus Dumbledore restored, and You-Know-Who returned. By Sunday, the Daily Prophet had even bought Harry’s interview with Rita Skeeter from the Quibbler and republished it. Luna said that her father had made so much off of the sale that they were taking a trip to Sweden to catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

The D.A., and all of Hogwarts, really, wanted more details about the battle against the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Harry let Neville, Luna, Ginny, and Pearl do as much of the retelling as possible, but there were some details only he could give, and now that Harry Potter was the darling of the Wizarding World once more, everyone wanted a chance to talk to him.

The only people who weren’t fans of Harry were a handful of Slytherin students — most notably, Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Theodore Nott. Their fathers had all been arrested following the events at the Ministry of Magic and were now sitting in Azkaban. The boys were rather bitter with Harry for that.

Harry was on his way back from visiting Ron and Hermione in the hospital wing — Madam Pomfrey was still treating them; Amber and Cedric had been dismissed the day before — when he ran into Malfoy. He had not expected strolling through Hogwarts alone to be dangerous, but he felt vulnerable as Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle headed straight for him in the wide entrance hall.

Harry did not step aside for them, nor even slow his pace. He had, in one part of his mind, a determination to show neither fear nor hesitation in front of someone like Malfoy. In the other, more reckless part of his mind, he remembered a looming destiny. As terrifying as it was, if Voldemort was supposed to be the one to kill him, it would be a laugh to let someone like Malfoy have a go at it.

“You’re dead, Potter,” Malfoy hissed, just when he stepped within earshot. Even as he said it, his eyes darted towards the nearby stairwells, in search of teachers that might catch them, or students
who might leap to Harry’s defense. But it was a warm day; most students had already made their way outside. No one was coming to help.

That did not deter Harry. He slipped his hands into his pockets, shoulders slack, a careful appearance of carelessness, and put on a cavalier grin as his hand tightened around the wand in his pocket. “Funny. You’d think I’d’ve stopped walking around.”

Malfy’s pale features twisted into a look of disgust that would rival his mother’s. He was furious, more furious than after any lost Quidditch match. “You’re going to pay,” He stepped forward so he was nearly nose to nose with Harry. He had to be; his voice would not have been audible otherwise. “I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done to my father.”

“Well, I’m terrified now. I s’pose Lord Voldemort’s just a warm-up act compared to you three.”

Malfy took a half-step back at the mention of Voldemort’s name, and Crabbe and Goyle looked as if they’d suddenly realized just how many sweets they’d had at dinner.

Harry laughed. “He’s your dads’ mate isn’t he? Not scared of him, are you?”

Malfy recovered quickly. “You think you’re such a big man, Potter — You wait. I’ll have you. You can’t land my father in prison —”

“I thought I just had.”

“The dementors have left Azkaban — even the Prophet knows now they belong to the Dark Lord. Dad and the others’ll be out in no time.”

“Yeah, I expect they will. Still, at least everyone knows what scumbags they are now —”

Malfy reached into his robes, but Harry was ready. Before Malfy had even gripped his wand, Harry had his wand drawn and against Malfy’s chin.

“Potter!”

Harry did not dare take his eyes from Malfy, but he knew the sound of Snape’s voice shouting his name too well. He heard the steady approach of Snape’s footsteps and when he spoke again he was at Harry’s shoulder.

“What do you think you are doing, Potter?”

Harry debated his answer. He had, upon his return to Hogwarts, made vague plans to apologize to Snape for the Pensieve incident and all the danger it had put Snape in, but here, in front of Malfy, those plans evaporated. “I was about to show Malfy some of the curses I learned in my duel with Bellatrix Lestrange, sir.”

“Put your wand away, Potter. Ten points from —” Snape stopped and turned to the four hourglasses, hanging just outside the Great Hall. “Ah, it seems Gryffindor is out of points to take from. In that case, Potter, we will simply have to —”

“Add some more?”

Harry’s heart soared at the sight of McGonagall stepping into the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts. She carried her tartan bag in one hand and leaned on a cane with her other, but she looked much better than the glimpse Harry had gotten of her in St. Mungo’s a few days earlier.
“What say you, Professor Snape?” she said. “I think Potter and his friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of You-Know-Who?”

Snape looked as if he were trying very hard not to roll his eyes. “I suppose.”

“So fifty for Potter, the two Weasley’s, Longbottom, and Miss Granger. Oh — and of course for Mr. Diggory, the Lais sisters, and Miss Lovegood.” As she spoke, rubies tumbled into the bottom of Gryffindor’s hourglass, followed by a shower of topaz into Hufflepuff’s, and a handful of sapphires into Ravenclaw’s. “Now, you wanted to take ten from Mr. Potter, I think, Professor Snape, so there we are.”

Though a few rubies returned to the top of Gryffindor’s glass, the two hundred and forty that remained below were sizable compared to the other houses. Slytherin’s still out-ranked each house, thanks to Umbridge’s Inquisitorial Squad, but now it at least looked like a proper competition.

“Now, Potter, help me take my things up to my office.”

Harry, eager to escape Snape and Malfoy, hurried to take the tartan carpet bag from McGonagall and walk with her up to Gryffindor Tower.

“I’m glad you’re better, Professor,” he said, once they were away from Snape and the Slytherins.

“And I’m pleased to see you are well yourself. I heard you got into a good bit of trouble in my absence.”

“Er — yeah. Sorry —”

“There is no need to apologize. I think too often we fail to take the actions that need to be taken. In the end, what you did exposed You-Know-Who to the world. Let us count our successes rather than our shortcomings.” As they passed the third floor corridor, freshly cleaned, she smiled. “I see Professor Flitwick has wasted no time clearing the Weasley twins’ swamp.”

“Seeing how he’s allowed to do things now that aren’t exactly related to his subject matter….” Harry grinned. “He got it taken care of easily — left that though.” Harry pointed to a space beneath one of the windows, where a bit of swamp had been left behind, cordoned off behind two thick red ropes. “Said it was a good bit of magic.”

“Those two were always going to amount to something, I just don’t think any of us were sure what it would be.”

“Their shop is doing well, I think. They sent Ron loads of sweets for his hospital stay.”

“Is everyone else doing as well?”

Harry adjusted his grip on her bag and held out his other hand to support McGonagall as they began climbing the fourth set of stairs. “Ron and Hermione are better, mostly, but they’re bored — and they don’t like sharing the hospital wing with Umbridge, but she just sort of sits there, staring at the ceiling.”

“So it’s true she was carted off by centaurs? Was that your doing, Potter?”

“Hermione’s, more than mine…. I expect you’re glad to be rid of her, Professor?”

“I believe we’ll all be better off for it.” She glanced down at the hand Harry had at her elbow. “I’m sorry I didn’t do more while she was here.”
“It’s alright. I know you did everything you could.”

McGonagall’s stern frown deepened. “Not everything.” She paused on the stair landing and leaned on her cane. Harry stopped, too. “I could have told your parents what she was doing to you the day she banned you from Quidditch. I should have, but I watched you lie to your mother and respected your silence. It was not my wisest moment as your professor.”

Harry had been so full of anger at Umbridge that day, and at his parents for the secrets and helplessness against Umbridge, that he had not even considered that McGonagall could have told them about his detentions then and there.

“I’d have been even angrier with you if you had.”

“It is not my job to make you happy, Potter. It is my job to teach you, and I’m afraid that was a poor lesson I imparted that day.” She took a few, slow, steady breaths and leaned on her cane. “I know your mother hasn’t forgiven me — she made that quite plain as I was leaving St. Mungo’s this morning.”

“Mum’s stubborn like that.”

“Yes, I remember her stubbornness quite well. Mostly I remember it set against your father and Sirius Black. It was not nearly so often I was on the wrong end of her temper, though I can’t say it was unheard of.”

“You are a good teacher, Professor, and I know you tried to look after us, even with Umbridge in charge. It’d’ve been worse if you weren’t here.”

She shook her head. “Your father was also an excellent flatterer, but not quite so earnest. I can’t say where you get that from.”

“Uncle Remus, I think.”

McGonagall smiled faintly, then pressed a hand to her chest and took in a deep breath. “I miss how quickly the young heal. Well, shall we?”

Harry helped her up the last of the stairs and into her office.

“Thank you for helping me with my bags, Potter. I think ten points to Gryffindor is in order.” She smiled, and Harry grinned.

She urged him to enjoy the warm weather outside, perhaps even take his recently liberated Firebolt out. Though Harry’s lifetime Quidditch ban had been lifted, thanks to Umbridge’s deposition, he didn’t take McGonagall’s advice.

The conversation about his parents in school had turned his mind back to the unfortunate set of memories he had seen in the Pensieve. The guilt that had been so quickly forgotten in the face of Malfoy returned full-force. He owed Snape an apology. Harry had let frustration and suspicion win and the consequences for that could have cost Snape his life. Harry knew that suspicion of friends had nearly killed his parents, and he had just seen Sirius and Remus already set against each other as war returned. Harry had no interest in repeating mistakes.

So, emboldened by McGonagall’s apology, yet with heavy feet and a heavy heart — he might know it was the right thing to do, but it was still a hard thing to do — Harry headed downstairs to the dungeons. He passed the Potions classroom and stopped in front of Snape’s office. Apologizing to Snape was never something Harry had dreamed he would do, but he knew he had to.
Harry knocked.

As the door creaked open, a dozen weak excuses flooded his mind: McGonagall had sent him for something, or Dumbledore was looking for Snape, or Harry had a question about something from the O.W.L. exam. The last one was the weakest of all, and Harry knew Snape would never believe it. It took all of Harry’s strength not to simply turn and run.

Snape stared at him. There did seem to be something like surprise in his glower, but it was always so hard to see much of anything but disdain on Snape’s face.

“What is it, Potter?”

The apology Harry had been so keen on saying died on his lips, and instead he found something close, but not quite. “I didn’t tell her,” Harry said.

Snape’s distasteful sneer twisted into a frown. “If you’ve come to blather nonsense, I —”

“I didn’t tell my mum. About what I saw — that you’re the one who told Voldemort the prophecy.”

Snape paused, then widened the door of his office for Harry to enter. Reluctantly, Harry stepped inside. It was the first time since their short-lived Occlumency lessons that Harry had been in Snape’s office, and the first time since Harry’s dip in to the Pensieve that he’d been alone with Snape.

Once Snape had the door closed behind them, he said in his cold, stern voice, “It is unwise to speak of such things where wandering ears might hear. There were many reasons that memory, along with others, was relegated to a Pensieve where you were not supposed to find them. If you were expecting gratitude for your discretion, you will find yourself gravely mistaken.”

Harry opened his mouth to say he hadn’t, to try again to form an apology, but Snape continued speaking, ignorant of Harry’s intentions.

“What you did the other day, Potter, was dangerous, reckless, and risked countless lives. Others may praise your actions but you will not find that here. I was given a task, and the risks with it are already what each of us in the Order know we may have to sacrifice. You are not in the Order — your job was only to stay at Hogwarts, to stay safe, and to keep the Dark Lord out of your mind. In the future, do as you are told, rather than galavanting across the country, stumbling your way into traps set by the Dark Lord because you are too willful and ignorant to even look for them. This may be difficult to drill through that thick skull of yours, Potter, but in war you follow orders, whether you like the orders you are given or not. Are we clear?”

If Harry had any hope that Snape might have forgiven Harry for his mistake, it was dashed entirely. That Harry had risked himself to save Snape, a professor he had never gotten on with, meant nothing. Harry supposed should have expected this; James, too, had once saved Snape’s life, and it had not changed the depth of hatred between them. And perhaps Harry truly deserved this lecture, but because it came from Snape, he still had trouble accepting it.

“Sorry, Professor. The next time I learn you’re in danger, I’ll stay here at Hogwarts, twiddling my thumbs and waiting for news.”

“Your arrogance knows no bounds. You and your father —”

“Do you hate him because of my mum?”
Snape’s sneer deepened. “Your father was arrogant and entitled long before he met your mother.”

“But you knew her first. That girl I saw in your memories — I didn’t not tell my mum what you did because of you. I did it because of her. She’s always talked about you differently than Dad and Sirius do, and now I know why. She trusts you, and in a time like this, I want to trust you too.”

Harry did not expect his words to change Snape’s mind nor endear him to Snape in any way. Whatever chasms had been formed between them were far too wide for such a small bridge, but Harry hoped it might do something for the relationship between his mother and Snape, or Snape and the Order. Harry was done being suspicions of allies. As his parents had faith in the best of him, so he wanted to have faith in the best of others.

His words, at least, seemed to give Snape pause. But Harry imagined it must be as difficult for Snape to swallow this advice as it was for Harry to swallow Snape’s admonishments.

“If you’re going to trust me,” Snape finally said, “then trust me to carry out the job that has been given to me, and do not put such a dangerous task in further jeopardy. Now, if you’re done wasting my afternoon, leave”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry stepped out of Snape’s office, not necessarily feeling better for what he had done, but knowing it was right that he had done it. The best bit of it, really, was knowing he would not be taking Potions next year, and so he would have very little to do with Snape at all.

Hermione and Ron were released from the infirmary a few days before the end of term. Freedom from the hospital wing was such a welcome relief to them that Harry spent those last few days outside with them, soaking in the sun and walking alongside the lake. They talked, a bit about the war, but mostly about the school year, and classes they planned to take in the fall. Harry still kept the prophecy to himself. It was not a burden he felt Hermione and Ron could share with him.

Umbridge was released not long after, and did her best to sneak away unnoticed the night before the end of the year feast. Peeves, however, saw her, and chased her out of the castle loudly. His noise attracted the attention of the students, and scores left their dinner plates to cheer Peeves on as he followed Umbridge to the edge of the grounds.

The last night of term was one of celebration for Harry’s dorm. The boys had all packed, and spent the evening polishing off sweets that had accumulated over the year, and finishing off the bottle of fire whiskey that Seamus had bought off of Sophie Roper. They were up late after the Hogwarts feast, laughing and chatting.

Despite the energetic conversations, no one asked about summer plans. There was no excited talk of traveling nor of visiting each other during the holidays. If anyone spoke of the future, it was about which classes they expected to take in the fall. Summer was an unknown, and no one wanted to address it.

Harry, Ron, and Neville couldn’t talk much about summer, as it probably involved the Order, but Harry wasn’t sure what a wizard’s war meant for Dean and Seamus.

Dean was a Muggle-born, and Harry knew he lived with his mother, who worked in a clothing shop. Harry knew little else, and he hoped Dean’s family would be safe, separated from the Wizarding World as they were. Seamus’s mother was a witch, though, who had married a Muggle.
Would she be in danger? Would her husband? Seamus himself?

The only way to know was to ask, and Harry did not want to ask.

One by one, each of the boys fell asleep, some passing out in the middle of a game of Exploding Snap, some halfway into their pajamas.

When Ron crawled into bed and the last of the lights in the dormitory were snuffed out, Harry finally climbed into bed. Despite falling asleep at such a late hour, Harry woke early. He had too much excitement to sleep. He was eager to see his parents out of the hospital, and he hoped they would actually be going home. It had been so long since Harry had been home. It would be nice to sleep in his own bedroom, and to see Pocksie and Mellie again.

Harry dressed quietly, and double-checked that he’d packed everything away. Neville’s snores were still loud when Harry slipped downstairs to the common room. The small fire crackled, and near it sat Katie and Alicia, talking quietly. They looked as if they’d been up all night. Alicia smiled at Harry, and Katie waved, but they didn’t make any move to invite him into their conversation. Harry had no desire to interrupt. He glanced out the window and knew exactly where he wanted to be.

Harry headed downstairs and out onto the grounds. The morning was already warm, but Harry didn’t take a moment to enjoy it. He went straight for the smoke rising from Hagrid’s cabin. Harry hadn’t seen Hagrid since he’d returned to Hogwarts, and he did not want to go home without saying goodbye.

Harry knocked on the door to the cabin. Hagrid was surprised to see Harry, but his grin was wide beneath his thick beard.

“Come in, come in, ‘arry. Glad you stopped by ter see me. Was worried I’d miss yeh this mornin’.”

Harry patted Fang and tried to keep the large hound’s drool away from his trainers as he sat down in Hagrid’s hut.

“Wouldn't leave without saying goodbye. Glad you're alright, and the Ministry didn't find you.”

“Yeah, I’m alright’. Hid out in a cave, wasn’ so bad. Yeh alright, Harry? Dumbledore said you ’ad a run-in with the centaurs.”

“Grawp got off worse than me and Hermione. Is he doing okay?”

Hagrid leaned back in his chair. Its legs creaked beneath his bulk. “Yeah, he was glad ter see me come back. Real sweet, askin’ abou’ you ’n Hermione. Much better behaved than when I left, tha’s for sure. The centaurs are right furious with me, though.” Hagrid shook his head and poured tea for himself and Harry. “Won't be easy to go in and out of the forest anymore.”

“How did Dumbledore convince them to give up Umbridge?”

“Don't know, ter be honest. He’s got a way with others, wizard or not. He’s convinced them Grawp can stay, too.”

“Will Firenze go back to them? Now that Dumbledore’s back, Trelawney’ll get her job back, won’t she?”

Hagrid frowned. “Tha’s a bit differen’. Centaurs don't like that Firenze ‘as been teaching wizards centaur secrets. Right shame, really. They study the stars and think they're apart from it all, but
Firenze ‘as got it righ’. We’re in this figh’ together, and they’ll see it soon enough.”

Harry took a sip of his very bitter tea. Meals with Hagrid were not enjoyable because of the food as much as the company. ‘Did they fight last time?’

“Last time….” Hagrid leaned back in his chair. The legs creaked under his enormous weight. “They stayed close to Hogwarts. It was safer in those days. With Dumbledore in charge, You-Know-Who’s army stayed well enough away. This time though, he seems determined to prove he can’t be stopped, and he’s been trying time and again to start by stopping the one who stopped him first.”

Though it didn’t hurt, Harry rubbed his scar.

“It’s a weight to carry, and I’m sorry yeh haf ter be the one ter do it. But we’ll get on alright.” Hagrid nodded. “Yer mum and Dad and Dumbledore, and Sirius and Remus — McGonagall and me, too, and Snape — yes, ‘arry, even Snape — we’re all here to look out for yeh.”

Hagrid’s words were comforting in a way Harry had not expected. He knew his parents wanted to keep him safe, and he knew how often he had still ended up in danger.

But Hagrid had reminded him that, in the end, his parents had always come to his defense. Time and time again, they had protected him. As a baby, they’d stood between him and Voldemort. Peter’s sacrifice had saved Harry in his first year. Lily had come to his aid against both Acromantula and a Basilisk. Remus and Sirius had come to help against Barty Crouch Jr. Lily, Remus, and Sirius had dueled Voldemort and his Death Eaters in the graveyard. Harry’s parents had stood with him at his trial. And they had all come to his rescue the other night in the Department of Mysteries.

Though this war came with a great burden for Harry, a burden no one could share, he was not — and never would be — truly alone.

Harry finished a breakfast of charred toast and eggs that somehow managed to be scorched and runny at once. He didn't regret his decision to visit Hagrid, but he thought he should have excused himself for breakfast.

Harry was washing down the worst of it with bitter, oversteeped tea when Hagrid stood.

“’Bout time ter be gettin’ down ter the shoreline to take the seventh years across. Yeh might want to head on up to the castle to catch a carriage.”

“Oh — I guess so.”

“Unless yeh want to come with? Students are allowed at the ceremony. Not a lot o’ them come, but yer allowed to watch. Say yer goodbyes.”

Harry had never been to a Hogwarts commencement ceremony before. It had never really occurred to him that he could go. He thought he should find Ron and Hermione, since he hadn’t seen them yet today, but Harry remembered that there were two other people he had been hoping to talk to before the end of the year and they would both be there.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Yeah, I’ll go.”

Harry followed Hagrid up to the castle and to the docks at the edge of the Black Lake. Harry hadn't been to this part of the castle since he was a first year, disembarking from the boat on that first night at Hogwarts, before he’d even been sorted.
The seventh years were arriving slowly, some with friends from their own year, some with friends or family from other years. Harry watched Katie walk down with Alicia and Pearl with her sister.

Then Harry saw one of the people he was keen to speak with, and he was surprised to see him alone.

Harry left Hagrid’s side to catch up to Cedric. “Hey!” he waved casually, and tried to smile, but it felt insincere. Cedric mirrored it just the same.

“Hey, Harry. Didn't expect you to come to this.”

“Yeah, I had breakfast with Hagrid. Thought I’d come see you off. Are you — er, alright?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. We got lucky again, didn't we?” Cedric’s smile faltered, and he flexed the fingers on his right hand. Harry could see the thin white scratches from Umbridge’s detentions that mirrored Harry’s own. However, unlike Harry, Cedric had a long, raised scar that ran down the length of his forearm. “It was only blood loss — well, blood loss and a severed tendon or two.”

“I’m sorry —”

“Don't.”

Cedric looked like he wanted to say more, but Dumbledore had arrived, and the group of students fell silent as Dumbledore approached the edge of the water.

“Welcome,” he said, and turned to face the gathering, “to the last thing you’ll do as students at Hogwarts. I believe you have heard enough lengthy speeches from myself over your years here, so to spare you another, I will ask your Head Boy and Girl to speak.”

Britta Marston and Edmund Troy, who Harry knew little outside of their names and positions, stepped forward from the group of seventh years, and took the space Dumbledore had been standing in.

“Well,” said Britta, a stern look in her eyes as she scanned the small crowd of her peers. “It’s been a hard year for a lot of us. We’ve all had different challenges to face, different than any year before. But we’ve made it here, and we did that together, as a class.”

“As your Head Boy and Girl,” Edmund said, “we’ve done our best to lead and guide the school. We were chosen by our teachers to represent the student body, and because of that we do not stand alone. Rather we stand with all of you. And as we leave Hogwarts, to face new challenges, we want to continue to stand with you, and to stand with each other.”

“Regardless of grades or classes or houses,” Britta said.

“Or Quidditch teams,” Amber interrupted, and there was a small laugh among the crowd. Even Britta smiled.

“Or Quidditch teams,” she added, “we are united as alumni of Hogwarts, and as witches and wizards. We will make difficult decisions after today, and we will struggle, but we will have each other. As you leave here today, Troy and I hope you’ll remember the friends you’ve made here, and you continue to remember each other as we begin a new chapter in each of our lives. Given recent events….” Britta paused, but she did not need to elaborate. The Prophet was well-read by everyone these days.

“We may be stepping into uncertainty,” Edmund finished for her, “but we don’t step forward
It was, to Harry, not the most inspiring speech he had ever heard, but it had moved some of the students. Cedric’s face was grim as he clapped; Cassius Warrington, a large boy from Slytherin, was openly weeping. Harry supposed that may have had more to do with this being his second attempt at graduating than it did with anything Britta and Edmund had said. But Warrington wasn’t the only one crying. Katie Bell was in tears as she hugged Alicia and kissed her cheek. Even Amber was rubbing her eyes.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, and stood before the boats. “A final word of wisdom: the decisions you make after today are like ripples along this shoreline, they have far reaching impacts. Remember your peers, remember those behind you, and be an example to be followed. Care for others, and help each other. It is the best advice I can give to fellow wizards of any time, who are no longer students, but equals. Now go, be proud of what you have accomplished, and look forward to more.”

Conversation started slowly as Dumbledore strode away from the boats. Students hugged friends and family good-bye. Some started climbing into the boats. Harry wanted to follow Dumbledore. He had a dozen questions about the prophecy and the war that he felt only Dumbledore could answer, but Cedric put a hand on his shoulder.

“Will you be around this summer?” Cedric asked.

“Er — I’m not sure. Will you?”

“Yeah. I told my mum and dad I’m joining up.”

“Are they alright with that?”

“I think they expected it. Mum’s worried, but Mum will always worry. I think the Department of Mysteries really scared them. I still haven’t told them I’m starting Auror training.”

Harry had no idea Cedric had any ambition to be an Auror. “Is that what you were always going to do?”

“No, but Kingsley’s agreed to take me on. They’re short-handed since the Azkaban breakout, and it’s only going to get worse. I want to fight back. This is the best way to do that. I don’t know if they’ll understand… but you do, right?”

Harry did, probably better than anyone else could have. Everything Harry had suffered through this last year, Cedric had been there too. They may not have struggled in the same way, but they’d each faced Voldemort, the disgrace from the Ministry, and Umbridge in the last twelve months.

“Yeah, I get it,” he said.

Once they had said their goodbyes, Cedric climbed into a boat with Amber, Cadwallader, and Roger Davies. Hagrid led the seventh years across the Black Lake, returning them to the place they’d began their journey as first years, newly arrived on the Hogwarts Express. Harry imagined what it must have been like for his parents, who had stood on this shore, just as Britta Marston and Edmund Troy had. They, too, had had to deliver a speech as their friends headed off into war. Harry wondered what they had said to encourage their peers, or what Dumbledore had said to them all.

“Harry.”

Harry jumped at the sound of Dumbledore’s voice. He was surprised to see the Headmaster
standing at his elbow.

“Sir?”

Dumbledore’s usually kind smile seemed faded somehow, and the twinkle in his eyes dim. “You may want to hurry to the carriages, or you’ll miss the train.”

Harry turned back to the castle and saw Pearl and Katie waiting for him at the top of the hill. He still had a dozen questions for Dumbledore about Voldemort, about the prophecy, about Occlumency —

It was as if Dumbledore saw each question spring into Harry’s mind as he thought them. “There will be time for that later,” said Dumbledore. “Go, enjoy your time with your friends, and your summer. It is what your parents want for you, after all.”

It did not make the burden of Harry’s future any lighter, but he trusted that Dumbledore was right. There would be time later. Harry did not know how much time, but he would take what time he was given.

“Thanks, Professor. Have a good summer.”

“You as well.”

Harry hurried to catch up with Katie and Pearl. They talked Quidditch as they walked, about who had just graduated and who might fill up the open spaces on the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff teams next year. With Umbridge gone, Harry could be Seeker again. Katie suggested he might even be Captain, but Harry waved the suggestion off. Katie had been on the team longer; surely it would be her.

They caught the last of the carriages from the castle to the train. Once at the station, Katie and Pearl left Harry to go find Alicia and Amber, since most of the seventh years would still return to London on the Hogwarts Express. Those who had passed their Apparition tests could choose to Apparate from Hogsmeade to their home. As Harry boarded the train, he saw Cedric walk towards town with Roger Davies. Cedric, it seemed, would not be joining him for the trip home.

Harry decided to search for Ron and Hermione. He realized suddenly they hadn’t seen him at all today, and they might be worried about him. He started towards their usual space at the back of the train, but before he got there, he passed Ginny and Dean, halfway into one of the compartments, breaking off what looked like a rather lengthy kiss.

“Stay here,” Dean said.

But Ginny laughed. “I’ve got to find Ron. I’ll write you this sum — Oh, — Harry, hi!”

Harry waved uncomfortably.

“Where’ve you been all morning? We looked for you at breakfast.”

“Just Hagrid’s.”

Ginny kissed Dean’s cheek again, repeated her promise to write, then left him to his compartment with his own friends. She and Harry continued towards the back, in search of their friends.

“Er —” Harry was not sure how to phrase his question. “I thought you were — you know — Corner.”
“Oh, Michael?” Ginny snorted. “He’s a sore loser. He sulked when Ravenclaw lost the cup, and I wouldn’t comfort him, so he went off to comfort Cho. I’m with Dean now.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

As Ginny opened the door to a compartment with Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna, Harry wondered why, if he was over Cho, the tiniest slice of jealousy began to creep its way into his stomach.

Ron and Hermione gave Harry a lecture on disappearing without warning. He took it in stride, remembering his near-duel with Malfoy the other day, and for the rest of the train ride, Harry did exactly as Dumbledore had said: he enjoyed his time with his friends.

When the Hogwarts Express pulled into King’s Cross that evening, Harry searched the platform for his parents. He didn't see them, but he did see Mr. and Mrs. Weasley with Fred and George. They were all waving excitedly as the train pulled into the station.

Harry waved back. As soon as the train slowed to a stop, he, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville joined the Weasleys on the platform.

“Hey, Ron,” Fred pulled his younger brother into a small headlock, “what's all this running off to London without us?”

“Get off.” Ron squirmed and managed to work himself out of Fred’s grip.

George clapped him on the shoulder. “Don't take it too seriously, little bro. Fred and I think you're turning out to be a fine prefect, breaking all the right rules.”

Fred straightened his dragonskin waistcoat, so new it still gleamed in the orange sunlight. “And you did manage to win Gryffindor the cup without us, so I guess we can forgive you for leaving us out of the adventure.”

“Yeah, some adventure,” Ron mumbled, as Mrs. Weasley pulled him into a hug then looked over his arms. Madam Pomfrey had treated him well, but pale pink stripes still interrupted the spattered freckles along his arms. “It’s fine, Mum — We’re fine.”

Mrs. Weasley still looked like she might cry, even as Ginny assured her that she was alright. Molly seemed poised between praising her children and scolding them, and she settled on worried hugs and kisses.

Harry, for his part, had had enough of both praise and scolding. He hoped his parents had said all there was to say about the Department of Mysteries.

Before Harry could ask Mr. Weasley if they knew where his parents were, the Potters, Sirius, and the Longbottoms crossed the magical barrier between Platform 9 and 10 and stepped onto the Hogwarts Platform.

Neville rushed to hug his parents and met them halfway. Harry, however, hesitated, held back by the visible signs of how his parents had been hurt by his mistake.

Lily waved with a smile, still full of its usual grace, but her long red hair that usually hung free to her waist had been pulled up into a stylish knot. Harry noticed she wore a Muggle-dress that hung loose, without a belt. He wondered if her ribs were still healing. James’s bandages had been replaced with an eyepatch, and he had a few days of unshaved salt and pepper scruff growing in over his chin. Only Sirius looked as he always did, hair loose over his shoulders and unkempt, hands in
the pocket of his leather jacket. He, too, waved when he saw Harry.

Fred let out a low whistle as the Potters approached. “That’s a good look for you, Mr. Potter,” Fred said.

“Distinguished,” said George. “Mad-Eye ought to take some pointers.”

Sirius seemed on alert, poised to pounce if James seemed at all hurt by the statement, but James only laughed.

“Mad-Eye’s look isn’t exactly a tough act to improve, is it?”

Lily kissed James cheek, “You really do look dashing and roguish all in one,” and James seemed to glow at the praise.

Then Lily wrapped Harry in a hug. Harry was hesitant to return it, worried about hurting her again, so he leaned his head on her shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re alright, Mum,” Harry said. He checked to make sure Sirius was sufficiently occupied, talking to Fred and George about their new suits and booming business, then asked quietly, “Any word from Uncle Remus?”

“Afraid not.” Lily kissed his cheek and broke the hug. “Ready for a bit of a walk?”

“We’re going to Headquarters?” Harry tried not to sound disappointed.

“Just for a bit. Long enough to get our things before we head home.”

Home. It had been far too long.

They made sure Hermione was reunited with her parents on the other side of the magical barrier — not that her parents couldn't cross, but traveling through a solid brick wall was difficult to get used to if you hadn't been doing it since you were eleven. Everyone said their goodbyes, made promises to write and to be reunited soon, then the Longbottoms and Potters walked through London together.

Harry kept his hand in his wand pocket, as on alert as his parents and Sirius were. Neville, too, kept looking into each nook and hesitating before turning corners, though Harry knew Neville did not yet have a wand to fight back with.

They were not ambushed on the way to Grimmauld Place, though. As they safely crossed the threshold into Number 12, Harry felt everyone’s tension evaporate.

“We shouldn’t be long,” Lily said, and headed upstairs.

Alice kissed Neville on the cheek, “We just need to throw our things into a trunk,” and she followed Frank and James upstairs.

Sirius sighed. “It’ll be a shame to have this place empty again.”

“Do we not need a Headquarters now that the Ministry knows about You-Know-Who?” asked Neville.

“We don't have to keep surveillance on the Department of Mysteries anymore. This will still be Headquarters, but we won't all be in London as much. There’s other jobs to be done.”
Harry wondered if Sirius was actually bitter, or if Harry imagined the sharpness in his tone, simply
because he knew how Sirius felt about Remus’s mission.

“You’ll still stay with us a lot, though, won’t you?” Harry asked. He did not think it would do to
leave Sirius alone here with Regulus, without Remus for more pleasant company.

Sirius grinned. “Of course. You couldn’t get rid of me that eas —”

He was cut off by a scream from upstairs.

The scream was followed by a higher, shriller shriek, not unlike the painting that was curtained off
at the end of the hall. They all turned to be sure the portrait of Walburga Black was still covered,
and she was, at least for a moment. However, as the screaming continued, it set the portraits in the
house off, and the curtains over the painting flew open. The portrait of Walburga Black’s shrieks
joined the ones that were already so much like hers, and the other paintings followed suit, filling
the house with a cacophony of screams.

Harry, Sirius, and Neville ignored the paintings and took the steps two at a time, certain that the
more pressing problem lay somewhere above them.

“— of those bloody portraits!” they heard Alice say as they dashed past the room she’d and Frank
been staying in.

“James, go help Sirius with that curtain and —” Lily’s voice came from just one floor above as
Sirius, Neville, and Harry continued their dash further up. As the portrait shrieks faded behind
them, a singular shriek, intercut with curses and foul criticisms, grew louder, from somewhere high
above the habitable areas of the house.

Sirius was first up the last of the stairs, Harry not far behind, and Neville a few steps below. At the
end of the hall was a ladder going up into the attic. It was clear now that the shrieking was coming
from the attic, and Harry felt sure it was Walburga Black’s voice.

“It does seem like my mother to have two portraits made of herself,” Sirius grumbled, but he
looked uneasy as he climbed the ladder into the attic.

Harry followed, surprised to find an attic that looked a lot like the attic he had grown up with in his
own house. It was cluttered, full of furniture and boxes from generations past. He noticed that half
of it, the half nearest the entrance, seemed well-organized. Boxes were stacked neatly, nothing was
out of place, and things were as condensed as they could be. It had been thoroughly gone through
and cleaned, much like they’d been doing to the house last summer. The rest of the attic was still in
disarray, chaotic and unmanaged. The shrieking and reedy curses were coming from somewhere in
the mess, and Harry followed Sirius around a trunk of boxes to see something neither of them had
expected, something that made Sirius fumble for his wand.

It was not a portrait that was screaming, it was Walburga Black herself. She stood, tall and stately,
in black robes decorated with intricate silver embroidery. Her face was not wax-like, like her
portrait, but pale and pinched. Her words, however, were the same.

“Abomination! Shame of my flesh! How dare you befoul the name of my fathers!”

At her feet sat Regulus Black, looking as if he had fallen backwards and been Petrified he was so
still. He stared up at her, his face a portrait of fear, almost identical to Sirius’s.

Harry did not think it likely Walburga Black had been hiding in the attic all these years while the
world thought her dead and he searched the attic for a reasonable solution. The open trunk just
behind her, filled with dishes and worn parchment, a perfect dark and dusty hiding place, told 
Harry all he needed to know.

“Sirius, it’s just a boggart,” Harry shouted over the din of her shrieks.

That knowledge did not seem to stir Sirius to action. He remained still, wand ready, but no spell on 
his lips.

“Blood traitor — foul child, a disappointment from the moment you were born — unneeded — ”

Harry could step in front of them, and try to vanish the boggart himself, but he knew it would turn 
into a dementor, and he remembered that Regulus and Sirius each had their own horrors with 
dementors. It was possible he would only make this worse.

He turned behind him to see Neville crawling over the mess of trunks and tables to reach them.

“Neville, it's a boggart,” Harry said. “Can you get rid of it?”

Neville looked at the shrieking woman. He seemed a bit intimidated, but he put on a brave face. 
Surely she was nothing compared to the Death Eaters he had fought not long ago.

Neville held his hand out for Harry’s wand and Harry willingly handed it over. As Neville pushed 
himself between Regulus Black and Walburga Black, the woman shifted. Her screams died out and 
her face pulled itself into a sneer. The embroidery on her robes vanished and her face twisted into 
the pallid visage of Severus Snape.

This seemed enough to stir Regulus and Sirius, no longer frozen by fear, as Neville shouted, 
“Riddikulus!”

Snape’s robes transformed into a tight corset and he suddenly carried a red handbag and wore a 
pheasant-feathered witch’s hat. He looked stunned, and Harry, Neville, Sirius, and Regulus each 
burst into laughter.

The boggart vanished into a wisp of smoke, and Sirius, still shaking with laughter, sank onto the 
floor beside his brother. Neville returned Harry’s wand.

“Thanks,” Sirius said, smiling up at the two of them. “Sorry we aren’t much good with boggarts.”

Regulus stood and smoothed his robes. “I can’t say I’ve had the pleasure of meeting one before. It 
certainly caught me off guard. Your method of facing yours though is quite striking.”

“Er — thanks,” said Neville. “Is… is your worst fear really…” But Neville seemed to realize how 
inappropriate the question was halfway through, and didn’t bother to finish.

“What are you doing up here, anyway?” asked Harry, knowing it was probably best for Sirius and 
Regulus to change the topic. “Is this where you disappear to all the time?”

“I’ve been cleaning out the attic all year,” Regulus answered. “It’s quite a task, and not one I 
entrust to anyone who won’t preserve the important artefacts.”

“A dangerous task alone, clearly,” said Sirius. “You should have asked for help.”

“I’ve had Kreacher, but I sent him down to start dinner. I didn’t think there was anyone else who 
could’ve been trusted up here.”

Sirius did not seem hurt by this. He only shook his head. “If you want to go searching through dark
artefacts alone, I suppose I’m not one to stop you.” He pushed himself back up to his feet. “You know if you just ask me —”

“I’m quite content on my own,” Regulus snapped, his voice acidic in a way he did not usually speak to Sirius. It sounded a bit closer to the way Regulus spoke about Snape. Perhaps it was just the fear from the boggart that had Regulus on edge. His eyes scanned the attic with a fierce, almost protective glare, though, and he motioned to the stairs. “It is best we all get back downstairs. The air up here is stifling.”

Sirius frowned, concern on his face, but he did not put up a fight.

Like Mrs. Weasley, careful to keep the children away from Order secrets, Regulus ushered them out of the attic. He closed the trapdoor and even locked it with his wand before climbing down the ladder.

The shrieking of portraits in the house had been replaced by the worried cries of James, Lily, Alice, and Frank, calling for Neville, Harry, and Sirius.

Sirius hurried down the stairs. “Sorry — just a boggart — Neville took care of it….”

Regulus seemed determined to stay between the attic and everyone else, so when Neville paused at the top of the stairs, Regulus waited, too.

“Mr. Black,” Neville said nervously, “I was just… it’s only… if your mum is really your worst fear, and you face her portrait any time it gets loud, but….”

“A portrait is nothing compared to flesh.”

“I guess, but —”

“I’m sure your parents would like to see that you’re alright, and congratulate you for your quick thinking.”

Harry, however, caught Regulus’s eye as they continued downstairs and thought he knew, for possibly the first time, what Regulus was thinking. He was avoiding the conversation about Voldemort. Regulus had cited his fear of Voldemort as his reason for not going to the Ministry of Magic. Regulus, who had known Snape had gone to Voldemort, had dismissed Harry’s vision and refused to help when directly asked. Because of fear.

Remus had said that fear often made people do things they would regret, things they might not do otherwise, like keep a secret or betray a friend. Harry knew he should trust that Regulus had truly been acting out of fear that night, but now that he had seen Regulus in real terror, he felt unsure. It was nothing like the Regulus Harry had seen in the graveyard a year ago, who had tried to curse Voldemort.

Though Harry had decided that when it came to Snape, he was done being suspicious, he found suspicion creeping its way back into his mind. It seemed Regulus was hiding something, something about Voldemort, something about the attic. Regulus Black had certainly always seemed like a man of secrets, but his secrets had never felt deadly before.

Once they had made their way downstairs, Harry assured his parents he was alright and apologized for making them worry. He wondered if he would ever reach a point in his life where he would stop apologizing for that.

“I, for one,” said Lily as the Potters and Longbottoms gathered in the hallway with their trunks,
“am quite ready to be going home.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t have been right to leave without having to silence the portraits one more time,” said Alice.

Frank laughed, and as he did, his stomach grumbled loudly.

“We’ve sent word onto the house-elves to have dinner ready for us,” said James, “if you’d care to join us.”

“We’ve promised my mum we’ll see her for supper,” Frank said. “Another time perhaps.”

“We’re going to Gran’s?” Neville asked. “Do we have to?”

“She wants to see you and hear about your O.W.L.s. Maybe don’t mention to her you ran off to the Ministry on a thestral, though.” Frank frowned. “She worries about you enough as it is.”

“A raincheck on dinner, then,” said Lily. “We’d love to have you, all of you,” she turned to the Black brothers, hovering in the hallway.

Sirius grinned. “You know I’ll be there for tea daily.”

“I’m grateful for your invitation,” said Regulus, which seemed as polite and noncommittal an answer as possible.

They said their goodbyes and the Longbottoms stepped out to the street to Apparate home. The Potters took the Floo Network, so they would not have to Apparate to the edge of their property and walk to the house in the center.

As Harry stumbled out of the fireplace and into the kitchen at Styncon Garden, he was struck first with the scent of Picksie and Mellie cooking something warm, roasted, then by the familiar earthy smell of the garden. The windows were open, the warm summer air filtered in, and despite everything that had happened this year, as awful as Umbridge and Voldemort had been, and the danger that Harry, his friends, and family had encountered these last few weeks, all Harry felt was an overwhelming joy to be home.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and headcanons are always appreciate! I'll see you for Half-Blood Prince soon!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!