Seasons of Love

by Stump_Pan (jhanjones)

Summary

How different would things have been if Severus Snape picked up Harry instead of Hagrid?

Snapshots what might have been through all seven books done by season.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Ten…nine… Eight…Seven…Six…Five…Four… Three…Two…Bang!

“Where’s the cannon,” Dudley asked stupidly.

The door to the shack came crashing down. The man standing in the doorway was tall, but not particularly large. Still, he managed to cast an impressive silhouette. He was dressed in black from head to toe. That in and of itself was a bit strange. What made the man even odder, was the man was wearing some sort of robes. Harry had seen people dressed like this before, but it was normally right before Aunt Petunia rushed them away.

The Dursleys came rushing out of the bedroom. Uncle Vernon came out a shotgun in his hands.

“You!” Aunt Petunia seethed seeing the man.

“Hello Tuney,” the man said casually. The man withdrew a long wooden stick from somewhere in the depth of his robes.

“What are you doing here?” Petunia hissed.

“I’ve come for Potter.” The man said casting a steely eye around the small hut. His eyes landing on the smaller of the two boys almost instantly.

“He’s not going. We said when we took him in that we put a stop to all this nonsense.” Uncle Vernon thundered.

“This is for you,” the man said taking a step closer to Harry.

“He’s not going,” Uncle Vernon repeated. He raised the gun, aiming it at the man.

The man glared at Uncle Vernon. With a flick, of the stick, the gun in Uncle Vernon’s hand disappeared, just like magic.

“The boy is going.” The man said flatly. “I would like to see you try and stop me.” He turned his attention to the black-haired boy once more. “Potter, take the letter.”

Harry took the bit on paper nervously. He didn’t know much about this man, but he could tell he was not someone to cross. Aunt Petunia seemed to know him too. And she didn’t like him.

Harry opened the letter with shaky fingers. He pulled out several sheets of parchment. His eyes cast over the stationary, stopping upon reading “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”.

“Sir,” Harry said nervously.

The man rolled his eyes. “What is it, Potter?”

“What does it mean School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?” Harry asked confused.

“You’re a wizard, Potter.” The man stated as if it was obvious.

“I’m not a wizard,” the boy protested, “I’m Harry, just Harry.”

The man snorted. “Potter, have you ever wondered why strange things happen when you are angry
Harry thought about it. The sweater that shrunk, the horrible haircut, all the other strange things that had gotten him in trouble. The man hadn’t phrased it as a question. He knew Harry had done things, without even asking.

“Are you a wizard too?” Harry asked the man.

“I am Professor Snape, Potions-” the man began.

“He’s a freak,” Petunia interjected. “It’s his fault your mother is dead.”

“What!” Harry said spinning from the man to his aunt and back again.

A dangerous flash of anger crossed the man’s dark features. “Silence Tuney.”

Petunia ignored him. “If it wasn’t for him, your mother would be alive.”

Harry looked at her and then back to the man.

“She wouldn’t have been such a freak and gotten herself blown up.” Petunia continued.

“Blown up? You told me my parents died in a car crash!” Harry shouted back.

If it were possible, the man looked even more annoyed at this statement.

“A car crash kill Lily,” Professor Snape scoffed. “She was one of the greatest witches of the age.” He turned to the boy. “Your parents were murdered.”

“What?” Harry asked dumbfounded.

“A dark wizard killed them,” Professor Snape said matter-of-factly.

“Why?” Harry asked.

Screwing up his courage or at least irritation Uncle Vernon barked, “Stop this.”

Professor Snape shot a glare at Uncle Vernon and Uncle Vernon was silence once more. He issued his family into the small bedroom.

The man, Professor Snape, continued as if there had been no interruption. “Your parents were part of a group that was fighting the dark forces. They lost their lives in the fight.”

“Oh,” Harry said sadly.

“Yes,” Professor Snape said slowly.

“Come along Potter,” Severus said briskly standing by the door of the shack. “That is unless you wish to stay here.”

Harry hopped to his feet. “But where are we going? It’s the middle of the night.” The boy asked.

“You shall see.” Professor Snape placing a hand on the scruff of the boy’s neck.

Harry stepped out of the small shack. The rain was still pouring down, but he wasn’t getting wet. He looked up to see if the professor was holding an umbrella. He wasn’t.
“Ho-” began to ask, but he stopped. He suddenly felt like he was being sucked through a straw. An instant later there were someplace else. Harry was in a heap on the ground. Harry had no idea where it might be, but it was most definitely not outside the shed on the rocks.

Harry stood and brushed off the dirt from his landing. He looked a little more to see if he could figure out where they were. There were a number of dustbins next to Harry. Black and white cat ran past him.

“Come along, Potter,” Professor Snape ordered. The man had come through their trip much more gracefully. He brushed a bit of nonexistence dust from his robes.

“What was that?” Harry asked taking two strides for every one of the professor’s.

“Disapperition and Apperition,” Professor Snape replied.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“What you just experienced. Think before you speak. If there is specific information desired, be sure to ask the appropriate questions.” Professor Snape instructed.

Harry looked at him puzzled.

Professor Snape rolled his eyes at the boy’s lack of comprehension. “Never mind, come along,” the man said again.

Harry followed the man into a building. They entered a dingy pub. There was a large fire in the corner of the room. An old man was smoking a long thin pipe reading a newspaper. Two old women were talking quietly showing each other strange objects. Several weird looking little men were around another table. Harry didn’t like their long fingers or pointed faces. They made him nervous.

Professor Snape ignored all of the other occupants. Instead, he moved with purpose towards the bar.

“Evening P’essor S’ape,” the toothless man behind the bar greeted the professor.

Professor Snape nodded in greeting. “We need two rooms,” the professor told the barman.

“Yes sir,” the barman replied. He disappeared around a corner and returned a moment later, two brass keys in hand.

“But sir, I don’t,” Harry began to protest.

Professor Snape brushed away his concerns. “You will reimburse me in the morning.”

“But I don’t have any money,” Harry was able to voice his objects this time.

“You do,” the professor reassured. “Now off to your room. I will collect you at 8:30 sharp for breakfast. Tomorrow will go to the bank and collect your money so you can pay for your school supplies.”

Harry followed after the professor up the stairs. The professor stopped in front of a room with a large brass number nine on the door. “This is your room. I will be in room number thirteen if you need me. I do not wish to be disturbed needlessly. Am I understood?”

Harry nodded.

“I will see you in the morning.” The professor said turning down the hall.
“Good night sir,” Harry said softly. "This is crazy," Harry mumbled to himself.

"Yes dear," a sleepy voice said behind him. Harry nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Who's there?" He demanded.

No one responded. Harry looked around the room, he was by himself. That was strange. He could have somebody spoke a second ago. The only thing behind him was a battered wooden framed mirror on the wall. And mirrors only talked in fairy tales weren’t real. Then again, wizards only existed in fairy tales too.

Harry, let it go as looked around the room more. It had a large comfortable looking bed with four pillows. The comforter was old and slight stained; Harry wasn't sure with what. A few of the spots were black, like ink from a pen. There were a few small holes. Even with all that, it was nicer than anything the Dursleys ever let him sleep in before. It was better than the floor of the shack that was for certain. The wooden wardrobe stood in the corner, its doors slightly askew. Harry smiled. This was better than sleeping on the floor of a shack on some rocks. It was even better than Dudley's second bedroom. At least to Harry, Aunt Petunia would hate it.

Harry crawled under the blankets knowing that this all must be some wonderful dream and when he woke up it would all be over. What seemed like only minutes later there was a tapping at the door. Harry burrowed deeper into the blankets. He refused to open his eyes. A second knock wrapped on the door. Aunt Petunia was knocking to wake him.

"If I don't wake up, maybe I can still pretend I'm a wizard." Harry thought to himself.

"Potter," an annoyed voice called with the third knock. That wasn't Aunt Petunia Harry realized instantly.

Harry's eyes shot open. He wasn't in Dudley's second bedroom, or even the shack on the rocks. He was in an inn.

"Potter, you better be getting ready," the dark man, Professor Snape called through the door.

"Yes sir," Harry called back.

"Be ready in five minutes," Professor Snape instructed.

"Yes sir," Harry said again.

Harry heard the sound of boots clicking down the hall. He grabbed his glasses from the bedside table and placed them on his nose. He couldn't do anything if he couldn't see. He pushed the covers away. It wouldn't take him long to get ready. He didn't have a change of clothes or anything. He forgot to grab anything when they were leaving the Dursleys. Harry pulled his clothes from the day before back on. He made sure to tuck in Dudley's old shirt that was about five sizes too big for Harry. Professor Snape looked like one of those people who expected you to dress properly at all times. For this reason, Harry tried to flatten his hair a bit, but it was no use. Harry pulled open the door just as the professor raised his hand to knock.

"G'morning sir," Harry greeted nervously.

"Potter," the man replied. He cast a steely gaze over the boy. His lips turned down at the boy's appearance. "Are those not the clothes you were wearing yesterday?"

Harry bit his lip uncertain.
"I expect an answer, Potter." Professor Snape said darkly.

Harry played with the cuff of his long sleeve shirt.

"Well," Professor Snape demanded.

Harry nodded, "Yes sir... We...I forgot to grab...to bring my clothes last night...." Harry rushed on to explain.

"That was my fault," Professor Snape consisted.

"I should have-" Harry began.

"Stop Potter," Professor Snape said raising his hand to stop the boy's objections. "It is not very often that you will admit I have made a mistake. Take it as it was meant."

Harry nodded not sure what to say to that.

"Tell me, Potter, are all your clothes in such a dreadful condition?" The professor asked.

Harry pulled his at cuffs once more. "What do you mean?"

"Could they all be used as circus tents? Do they all have stains on the knees? Or are these your play clothes?"

Harry bit his lip again.

"Potter, answer the question. You are in no trouble. I simply wish to know so we can plan our trip accordingly. You should have a proper wardrobe before attending Hogwarts." Professor Snape explained.

"Errrrr.... They're all sort of like this," Harry finally said.

Professor Snape nodded to himself. "Very well, we will have to make a stop in Muggle London before we return you back to your family."

Harry wanted to protest, but the man was already annoyed.

"Come along Potter," Professor Snape said turning down the hall once more.

Harry followed dutifully. The two went downstairs and ordered breakfast from the toothless barman.

"What's a Muggle?" Harry asked as he played with his fork as the pair waited for their food.

"An individual that does not possess magic. Your aunt is one of the most Muggle people I have even had the misfortune to meet." Professor Snape explained.

"How do you know Aunt Petunia?" Harry asked.

"We grew up near one another." The professor said taking the fork from the boy's ceaselessly twitching fingers.

"So did you know my mum too?" Harry asked looking up at the man's sharp features through his fringe.

"I would have gathered such from your aunt's outburst last night."
"Errrr..." Harry mumbled.

Professor Snape said, "I told you last night, Potter, if you have a question ask it. But ensure it is the right question. To answer your question, yes I knew your mother. We were in the same year at Hogwarts. However, we were in different Houses."

"What are Houses?" Harry asked excited to know more about this fantastic new place he was going.

The professor's tone became even more formal. "The students are sorted into four houses, Gryffindor, your mother and father's house, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and my own house, Slytherin. You are sorted into your House when you arrive in your first year. Your House is much like you family while you are at Hogwarts."

"How do you know what House you belong in?" Harry asked.

"You are sorted based on personality traits." Professor Snape elaborated.

The barman arrived with their plates. Harry dug into his breakfast, extra hungry from the pathetic excuse of a dinner the night before. Professor Snape ate at a much more leisurely pace.

The professor paid the bill when the finished and Harry followed him out the back of the building. The man pulled his wand and tapped it on the third brick on the left above the rubbish bins. Harry watched wonder struck as a stone archway appeared before them. Harry had to take two steps for every one of the professor’s to keep up.

The man walked with purpose down the crooked cobbled alley. He paid no attention to the myriad of astonishing shops all around them. Harry didn't have enough eyes to take it all in. Several times he had to run to catch up with his chaperone who just kept walking, not noticing Harry had stopped at some stall or other. Professor Snape placed a hand on the scruff of Harry's neck when they came to the bottom of a white marble staircase. Harry looked up awestruck.

"This is Gringotts," Professor Snape told him. "We will retrieve sufficient funds to purchase new a wardrobe for both the wizarding and Muggle worlds."

"But I don't have any money," Harry protested. The man snorted. "You have adequate funds, I assure you."

Harry walked beside the tall man up the steps. The little men with the pointed faces and long fingers disturbed him.

"What are they," Harry asked softly enough so only his guide could hear.

The professor did not keep down his voice, but he did answer Harry's question. "They are goblins, a highly intelligent race of creatures. They run the bank. If you have any sense, you will never try and cheat a goblin."

They approached one of the goblins standing behind one of the tall counters. "Mr. Potter wishes to make a withdrawal."

"And does Mr. Potter have his key?" The goblin asked.

The professor pulled a tiny metal key from one of his many pockets and gave it over for examination. He also pulled out a small glass vial and handed to Harry.

"What's this?" Harry asked eyeing it suspiciously.
"A stomach calming draught," the professor motioned for Harry to take it.

"But my stomach doesn't hurt," the boy protested.

"I am glad to hear it. I aim to keep it that way. The potion not only treats illness due to motion but will prevent it from developing." Professor Snape explained, his temper, slightly short.

Harry took the outstretched vial and downed the contents in one swift gulp. He made a face of disgust at the bitter taste. The goblin returned the key to the professor he gestured for another to take them down to Harry's vault. The three climbed into a rickety cart and speed off down the cavernous tunnels. Harry couldn't keep track of all the turns after much jostling around. They stopped outside a small metal door.

The goblin got out of the cart before Harry and the professor. "Key please," the goblin requested.

Professor Snape handed it over. The door opened silently. Huge piles of gold, silver, and bronze coins.

"Wow," Harry uttered gobsmacked.

"Wow indeed," Professor Snape said his lip twitching up for half a second.

"You can see why you will have no trouble with acquiring your school necessities."

"Yes sir," Harry agreed still looking at the coins. The man passed him a small leather bag.

"The bronze ones are knuts and equal to a pence. The silver ones are sickles, there are 29 knuts to a sickle. Each sickle is around 29 pence. Lastly, the gold ones are galleons, there are 17 sickles to the galleon and are roughly worth five pounds. However, the exchange rate between Muggle and wizard currency is variable."

Harry nodded but didn't totally understand what he was being told. All he knew was this was more money than he had ever had in his life. If the Dursleys knew it existed, it would have been gone long ago.

"Potter, I am taking thirteen sickles and eight Knuts for your room and breakfast this morning."

Professor Snape said counting out the coins with great care.

"Okay sir," said Harry.

The ride back up was just as unpleasant as the ride down. By the end, Harry was glad the man made him take the potion even if it tasted of sour milk. Their departure from the bank was delayed when they met Hagrid in the lobby. Hagrid it turned out was the Keeper of the Keys and Grounds of Hogwarts. He was also the person to get Harry from his parents' house the night they were killed. Professor Dumbledore sent Hagrid to get something from vault 713. Professor Snape got mad at Hagrid for mentioning that, but Harry didn't understand why. He grumbled about it all the way to the apothecary.

Harry didn't like the shop very much. It smelled of rotten eggs and old cabbage. The professor helped him pick out a good cauldron. He wouldn't let Harry get one that had any sort of dents, bumps, or nicks. He also suggested a few additional ingredients that were not on the school's required list.

Next, they went on to buying Harry quills and parchment. The professor bought him some practice sheets too. He didn’t call them a birthday present, but Harry thought of them as such. With one
eyebrow raised and a sneer on his sallow face, Professor Snape explained to he expected Harry to practice using a quill and ink before he arrived at Hogwarts. The man went on about the less abominable penmanship the better, even if there was even one fewer student with illegal scrawl it would make his life that much simpler.

Then it was robes and the bookstore. The professor dragged Harry away from a tome on modern jinxes. Harry heard him mumbling something about 'just like your father'. Harry didn't know what he meant by that.

Finally, there was only his wand left to get in Diagon Alley. This is what Harry had been looking forward to the most. His own magic wand. The wand shop was small and dark. A small bell dinged as they entered the store. The walls were crammed full of dusty boxes. A little man with sharp silver eyes appeared from the back.

"Ahhh, Harry Potter and Severus Snape," he greeted. "I've been expecting you of course, Mr. Potter. You'll be needing a wand of your own."

He placed Harry on a dais the tape measure doing all the work unassisted as Mr. Ollivander pulled boxes from the shelves. The old man started giving Harry wands to try. Harry felt sort of foolish waving the wands. He didn't know how he was supposed to know it was the right one for him. Mr. Ollivander didn't seem to mind the ever-growing pile of boxes. After what felt like the hundredth one Harry found his wand.

A warm rush of magic ran up his arm when it was placed in his hand. Sparks of red and gold shot from it at that instant too.

"Curious, very curious," Mr. Ollivander muttered as he placed Harry's new wand in the box and wrapped it.

"What's curious sir," Harry asked nervously.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Everyone. Mr. Snape's ebony and dragon heartstring, your mother's willow and unicorn hair. This wand, holly and phoenix feather it has a twin. The phoenix gave only one more feather. It is the core of the wand that belongs to the man who gave you that scar." Mr. Ollivander said putting a long wrinkled finger to Harry's forehead. "I think we can expect great things from you. He-Who- Shall-Not-Be-Named did terrible things, but great. Yes, I think we can expect great things from you."

Harry was glad to leave the shop, Mr. Ollivander made him nervous. On their way out of Diagon Alley, they ran into Hagrid again. He presented Harry with a snowy owl, a gift for his birthday. He explained that it was one of the three permitted pets and the most useful since they deliver your mail. Also, cats made him sneeze. Harry thanked the giant for the wonderful gift. She was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen and she was his. Aunt Petunia was going to hate her.

It wasn't until he and Professor Snape were sitting down for lunch in a Muggle hamburger restaurant after getting Harry's new Muggle clothes that Harry got a chance to ask about what Mr. Ollivander was talking about.

The professor explained about the dark times. How the Dark Lord, Voldemort went bad. He killed many people, but on the word of a foolish boy he wanted to kill Harry. Through all of this, there was a look Harry couldn’t identify, it wasn’t exactly sadness, but something similar to that. The man continued on about how when Voldemort went to kill Harry, the spell backfired and destroyed him. Harry was left with only a scar. This dark wizard was gone for now, but he would be back some
day. There were those that were still loyal to him too.
Harry's first trip to Hogwarts.

Harry pushed his cart through King's Cross Station. Uncle Vernon wasn't happy about having to drive Harry into London but thought it was better than Professor Snape or somebody else from Hogwarts coming to Privet Drive. His uncle stayed long enough to help Harry load his trunk onto a luggage trolley before getting back in the car and going home. None of the other Dursleys even came to say goodbye. It's not that that terribly upset Harry, or he would miss them but he knew most of the other kids would have their families there.

It was a good thing Professor Snape explained how to get onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. It wasn't a place most, if any, Muggle could help him find. One had to walk straight through a brick wall to get to the other side. The trickiest part was making sure nobody noticed your disappearance. Harry chose his moment as a local commuter train began loading on Platform Nine.

Harry let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding when he reemerged on the other side. A scarlet steam engine stood in front of him. The platform was crowded with people. Some students were already in their school robes, others in a combination of wizarding and Muggle attire. Harry navigated his cart down the train looking for an empty compartment. Spotting one that looked mostly empty Harry parked the cart and began to try and heave his trunk that weighed more than him onto the train.

"Do you want some help with that?" A man asked grabbing one of the ends of Harry's luggage. He was probably in his mid-40s or so. He wore khaki trousers and a dark blue button up shirt. His brown hair was close cropped, but little of it there was, was fuzzy.

"Yeah," Harry said with an appreciative sigh. Together the two were able to get it store an overhead compartment with no trouble.

"Thanks," Harry greeted breathlessly.

"It's no problem," the said brushing the dust off on his trousers.

"If you don't mind me asking, where are your parents?"

"Errr...they're dead," Harry said uneasily.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but where are your guardians?" The man asked instead.

"They're Muggles, so..." Harry began lamely.

"That doesn't mean they can't see you to the train." The man protested.

Harry didn't know what to say to the man. He wasn't wrong, but nobody before ever cared when the Dursleys did something like this. "They had an appointment," Harry tried lying.

The man looked at him skeptically but didn't argue the point any further. He seemed to be taking an
inventory of Harry. The adolescent shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. He wasn't used to people looking at him like that. He was very glad Professor Snape insisted on going and getting Muggle clothes too.

"Your first year at Hogwarts?" The man finally asked.

Harry nodded.

"Come, I'll introduce you to my daughter. It's her first year too." The man said waving a hand for Harry to follow back off the train.

Harry shook his head. "No, sir. I... You should get to say goodbye... As a family..."

"Fine," the man conceded. "I'll send her in here then."

"Okay," Harry agreed. He sat on the seat doing his best not to watch the man go and rejoin his family. There was the girl he mentioned. She was probably around Harry's height, she had very bushy brown hair. The door slid open again.

"Can I sit here?" A round-faced boy asked.

"Sure," Harry agreed. "Do you know need help with your trunk?"

The boy nodded vigorously. "Gran's not really able to carry it."

Harry followed the boy back to his cart and a very stern looking old witch wearing a hat with a stuffed vulture on top. Each boy grabbed an end of the trunk. It was a bit harder to get the trunk in the storage compartment this time, but they managed. The man must have brought his daughter's in too while they were out and there were three in the luggage rack at the point. The boy disappeared again. Harry could hear through the open window he had misplaced his toad. It was sitting on the seat across from Harry it turned out.

"I think that boy who helped you is Harry Potter," the grandmother told the boy.

"I don't know," the round-faced boy replied. "He looks just like his father," she said pensively. "Just like him, except his eyes. He must have his mother's eyes. You could learn a lot from him."

"Yes Gran," the boy agreed sadly. "Get on the train, Neville." The grandmother told the boy, Neville, issuing him back aboard. He stood at the door a moment. "I'll see you at Christmas. Don't forget to write to let me know you got there safely."

"Yes Gran," Neville said once more before rejoining Harry in their compartment. The girl with the bushy hair joined them a moment later. She and Neville waved to their families as they pulled out of King's Cross. They waved until they turned the corner, the station lost from view.

"I suppose I should introduce myself," the girl said turning to Neville, her hand extended. "I'm Hermione Granger." She had very large front teeth and a bossy sort of voice.

"I'm Neville," the boy said nervously shaking her hand awkwardly. Hermione then turned to the other boy.

"I'm Harry," he began to say.

"Holy cricket, you're Harry Potter," Hermione finished for him.

"Oh him, I mean yeah," Harry confirmed.
Neville looked at him again. "You are? My gran said you were."

"You're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century." She spoke very fast.

"Am I?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes, I got a few extra books for background reading." She explained.

"Do you really have the scar," Neville asked.

Harry lifted his fringe, putting the thin lighting bolt scar on display.

"Cool," Neville said sitting back. "Gran said you look just like your dad."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I don't remember him, or my mum."

" Haven't you seen a picture?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "My aunt and uncle don't have any pictures of them."

"What's it like living with Muggles?" Neville asked.

"Awful," Harry said instantly. "Not all Muggles, just my aunt, and uncle." He went on to explain about living in the cupboard under the stairs, never having any pocket money, the fact he only got his first birthday presents this year from his future teachers.

"That's horrible," Hermione sympathized. "My family would never do that."

"Are they Muggles?" Neville asked.

"Yes," Hermione agreed. She told them about her parents being dentists. She had to explain what that meant to Neville since his whole family was magical. Then they discussed how they all received their letters. Neville's family actually worried he wasn't magical enough to get a letter until he was eight; when he bounced down the garden path when his great uncle dropped him out of a window.

"When is your birthday?" Neville asked Hermione.

"It's in September, or I would have started last year."

"Mine is July thirty-first," Harry told them.

"It's the day after mine," Neville stated. "I'm glad we went to Diagon Alley before my birthday, not after."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"There was a break-in at one of the high-security vaults at Gringotts," Neville told him. "It was on your birthday."

"Really?" Harry was surprised to hear that.

"Oh, I read about that in the Daily Prophet," Hermione said excitedly. "They said nothing was taken, but they're adding additional security measures."

"Yeah," Neville agreed, "stuff like that makes Gran nervous. She gets worried because it would take
really dark magic to break into a place like Gringotts."

The ride north seemed to fly by, Hermione had to step outside as the boys changed into their robes. Soon they were pulling into the station at Hogsmeade. Upon arriving at the station the students started filing off the train. They made sure Neville had a hold of Trevor before they disembarked.

A light waved over the heads of the children. A loud voice called, "Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" The lantern was held by Hagrid. Even in the dark of the platform, it was easy to make out the giant's figure. Harry and his fellow first years pushed their way through the crowd.

"Alright there, Harry?" Hagrid asked when the boy made it over to him.

Harry nodded. His nerves were starting to kick in. Professor Snape told him he would be Sorted as soon as he arrived at the castle, but he hadn't said how they did it. Another boy, a tall one with red hair and lots of freckles was telling some of the others how his older brothers said it hurt a lot, there was also something about trolls. Harry hoped that wasn't true. The professor would have told him about something like that right?

The group of first years began to move as the last of them joined. Harry's thoughts on the Sorting were temporarily distracted as Hogwarts came into view for the first time. They followed Hagrid around the shore of a dark lake. A fleet of little boats sat waiting at the water's edge. With a minimally amount of pushing the boys and girls climbed in threes and fours into the boats per Hagrid's instructions. With a wave of Hagrid's pink umbrella, they set sail across the lake. The windows' warm yellow light reflected on the surface of the water. They all had to duck as they went under a curtain of ivy hiding away the docks.

Once everybody was on land once more, and Neville's toad returned to its master after he went missing in the boats. Hagrid knocked on a hidden door. Harry was happy to get inside the warm castle and escape the cool night air. They were let in by a very stern looking woman. It was clear she was not one who approved of rule-breaking.

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

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

They were let into a huge entrance hall. Torches lit the stone walls. The ceiling high above, a magnificent marble staircase in front of them. They followed her across the flagged stone floor to a small empty chamber.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall greeted. "The start-of-term banquet will begin in a few moments. Before the feast can start, you must be Sorted. "The Sorting Ceremony is very important. It is where you are put into one of the four houses. The four houses are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin. While you are at Hogwarts your house will be like your family. You will attend classes with your house, eat meals at your house table, and sleep in your house dormitory. Your triumphs will earn your house points while any rule-breaking will cost your house points.

"Now the ceremony will start in a few minutes, I suggest you take a few moments to smarten yourselves up." Her eyes lingered on Neville's misbuttoned cloak which was under his right ear and a large smudge of dirt on the red headed boy's nose. She turned and left them then.

A blonde leaning casually against the wall spoke up, "They were saying on the train you're Harry Potter."
Whispered conversation broke out among the students.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. The boy stepped forward his hand extended.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," the tall red haired boy snickered at that. "You think my name is funny? Loads of red hair and hand me down robes, no need to ask your name, Weasley. See Potter, you'll learn that some wizarding families are better than others. I can help you with that."

Harry looked at Draco to Weasley, then back to Hermione and Neville. "I think I can figure that out for myself, thanks."

Professor McGonagall returned before Draco had a chance to respond. They followed her into a large chamber, the Great Hall. It's ceiling looked just like the night sky. Hermione explained to any who was listening that it wasn't really the sky, it was enchanted to look like it. Harry wasn't paying much attention, he was too nervous.

The queue of students came to a stop in front of the rest of the school. A three-legged stool was placed in the center of the room, a dirty hat on top of it, everyone was watching it. Harry stared at it confused until it began to sing. It sang of the qualities of the different houses. None of them sounded exactly like where Harry would fit. He didn't feel all that brave, curious, hard working, or cunning. He was more nervous and nauseous than anything.

He knew his parents were in Gryffindor, Professor Snape was the head of Slytherin. When Draco Malfoy was Sorted into Slytherin that made up Harry's mind. He didn't want to live with a boy that reminded him so much of Dudley. Neville and Hermione were both sorted into Gryffindor too.

When it was Harry's turn the whole hall held its collective breath.

"Please, not Slytherin," Harry begged under his breath. "Please, not Slytherin."

"Not Slytherin hmmm... A fine mind, loyal, bravery oh yes, there is cunning too..." A voice whispered in his ear.

"Anywhere but Slytherin," Harry continued to chant.

"You could make many many important friends in Slytherin. It could help you on your way to greatness..."

"Please, not Slytherin."

"Well, if you're sure, better be Gryffindor!" The hat exclaimed the last word to the hall at large.

Harry walked over to his new table. He couldn't help but look up at the Head Table. Professor Dumbledore raised a glass to Harry, but it was the look of disappointment on Professor Snape's face that stuck with Harry.
The first month at Hogwarts had been interesting for Harry. In addition to learning how to find his way around the castle, he was dealing with the having friends for the first time. Hermione would never let him or Neville copy, but if they let her read their homework, they always ended up with the right answers. Neville was very nice but very forgetful.

There were three other boys who shared the dorm with Harry and Neville. Ron was one of seven children, the youngest boy and sixth overall. His family were all wizards, except for maybe a second cousin or something. Seamus' family was half and half. His mother was a witch, his dad a Muggle. Dean's mum was a Muggle, but he didn't know his dad, he left when Dean was very young. Dean was obsessed with football. He had a Westham poster above his bed. Seamus didn't understand how any sport could be exciting when nobody was flying. No, Seamus and Ron both liked Quidditch and would argue over which team was better. Harry did his best to avoid either of these arguments since he didn't follow football and had no understanding of Quidditch. He was more concerned about passing his classes. But Quidditch did have one thing Harry was looking forward to, flying.

Ever since he came to Hogwarts Harry wanted nothing more than to learn to fly a broom. He was finally going to get his chance Thursday afternoon. Hermione and Neville did not share his enthusiasm. Both would rather keep their feet firmly on the ground. In Neville's case, Harry had to admit that was probably for the best. Many of the wizarding children talked nonstop about their own flying adventures. Malfoy spent most of their Potions lessons bragging about his own skills.

The afternoon was cool and clear as Harry and his fellow first year Gryffindors. Harry's excitement dimmed slightly when he spotted Draco Malfoy, it seemed they were to have these lessons with the Slytherins. This was probably the worst pairing possible. Potions was the only time they saw each other and that was a good thing. Though maybe it wouldn't be too bad here. The Slytherins wouldn't get the favoritism that Professor Snape showed his own house. Harry didn't know what he had done, but the professor was so much colder to him since his arrival at the castle.

Brooms laid in two lines down the center of the column. The crowd split along house lines, Gryffindor on the right, Slytherin to the left. Nobody touched the brooms, however.

Madame Hooch walked down the center. "Good afternoon class," she greeted.

"Good afternoon," they replied.

"Stick your hand out above your broom and say 'Up'," she instructed.

Harry did as he was told the broom came zooming up to meet his outstretched palm. Hermione and Neville were having a much harder time with it. Hermione's broom simply rolled over. Neville's didn't even move. It took a long time for all the brooms to get in the air, Neville's being last.

"Mount your brooms," Madame Hooch ordered at that point. "On the count of three, I will blow the whistle. At that point, you will kick off from the ground, hover for a moment then return to the ground. Three...Tw-"

Neville was rising from the ground, his broom barely under control. Everyone watched as he rose into the air, almost a hundred feet at his highest. He fell at a much lower elevation, twenty feet perhaps. Madam Hooch rushed over to him. Neville whimpered softly, holding his arm to his chest.

Madam Hooch carefully took the injured arm under inspection. "Tsk tsk, a broken wrist," the
professor tutted. To the class at large, she announced, "I'm taking this boy to the Hospital Wing. You are all to stay firmly on the ground. I catch anyone in the air they'll be gone before they can say 'Quidditch'."

The class watched as the pair walked across the lawn until they disappeared into the castle. Draco picked something up off the lawn. It was Neville's Rememberall, a small glass ball a little bigger than a golf ball filled with white smoke that turned red when you forgot something. His gran sent it to him it just that morning.

"Maybe if he gave this a squeeze he would have remembered to fall on his fat arse instead," Draco joked.

"Give it here Malfoy," Harry demanded, stepping forward.

Malfoy just gave him a nasty smile. "I think I'll leave it someplace for Longbottom to find - how about the roof?" He grabbed hold of his broom and took off.

Harry grabbed his own broom.

Hermione took hold of Harry's sleeve. "Don't Madam Hooch said not to. You'll get us all in trouble."

Harry ignored her. His heart pounded in his chest first in anger, but as he took from the ground it changed to exhilaration. This was the best thing Harry had ever felt. He flew higher to equal that of Malfoy. The girls screamed while Ron Weasley let out an appreciative cheer. Harry made a tight turn to face Malfoy.

"Give it back Malfoy," Harry demanded once more, "or I'll knock you off that broom."

"Yeah?" Malfoy asked. His sneer wasn't as convincing this time, he was clearly worried.

Harry instinctively knew what to do. He held onto the handle tighter, leaned forward and shot toward Malfoy. The other boy moved out of the way barely avoiding a collision.

"You're up here all by yourself, Malfoy," Harry taunted.

"You want it so badly, catch it if you can!" Malfoy said throwing it with all his might before heading back to the ground.

Harry watched as the tiny ball plunged toward the ground. He leaned forward racing it, urging it faster lying closer to the handle. He stretched out his hand catching the ball just feet from the ground. Harry leaved out the broom and rolled onto the lawn a foot off the ground.

"HARRY POTTER!" Exclaimed Professor McGonagall as she ran across the lawn. "In my forty years of Hogwarts, I've never seen... You could have broken your neck! Come with me."

Harry's heart sank. He was going to be expelled he knew it. He wondered how the Dursleys would respond to him showing up on their doorstep again. But that's not what happened. She didn't take him to the Headmaster, no she introduced Harry to Oliver Wood, the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Wood made Harry the new Gryffindor Seeker, he was the youngest player on a house team in a century. Harry thought that would be the end of it. He was very wrong.

The next day Gryffindor had Potions with the Slytherins. Professor Snape seemed to be in a worse mood than usual. He snapped at Harry when Neville knocked over a vial of sticky sap since they were working together. Not only did he yell, he took five points. Harry did his best to focus on their potion and not lose Gryffindor any more points, or his temper. Professor Snape was being totally
The class was dismissed when the bell rang. Harry packed away his things before he could leave, Professor Snape called to him, "Mr. Potter, stay a moment."

Harry shifted his bag up his shoulder, "Sir."

Professor Snape came around to stand in front of his desk. "I heard about your exploits during your flying lessons yesterday."

"Sir," Harry asked confused.

"A fifty-foot dive, pulling up a foot above the ground, with no adult supervision," Professor Snape elaborated.

Harry shifted from foot to foot nervously.

"Are you aware you could have seriously injured yourself?" The professor asked.

Harry bit his lip. "Yes, sir."

"Madam Hooch directed you and your classmates to stay on the ground did she not?"

"Yeah, but Malfoy," Harry protested.

"What does Mr. Malfoy have to do with anything?" Professor Snape inquired, his temper running short.

"He wouldn't give me Neville's Rememberall. It fell out of his pocket when he fell. Malfoy picked it up and wouldn't give it to me. He was going to hide it somewhere." Harry explained.

"So you decided to follow Mr. Malfoy's rule breaking with your own?"

Harry was going to say something to defend himself, but the teacher held up a hand to stop him. "It was a rhetorical question, Potter. Mr. Malfoy's rule breaking does not excuse your own. You were instructed to stay on the ground. For failing to do so you will serve a week's detention with me."

"That's not fair," Harry objected.

A dark sneer crossed the man's sallow features. "Would you prefer to make it two? No, it is perfectly fair, Potter. What is unfair is you being rewarded for your rule breaking when every other student would have been punished, to begin with. Let me make this clear, if you were in my own house, you would have been."

"Why do you care?" Harry asked.

"Tread carefully, Potter." Professor Snape warned.

"You're not my Head of House," Harry pointed out.

"I am not," the man agreed, "however, I would like you to see your next birthday. Your mother gave her life for you, this is how you wish to use that sacrifice, to die over simple trinkets? You are too reckless, Potter, exactly like your father. Perhaps a week’s detention will make you think before you act."

Harry stared at the man speechless.
"I will see you tomorrow evening at seven o'clock."

"I have Quidditch practice," Harry stumbled, the professor's words sinking in.

"Then you will have to explain to Mr. Wood why you will fail to be there, Potter." The professor said his tone firm.

"Yes sir," Harry sulked.

"I will see you tomorrow, Potter," Professor said dismissing the boy.

Instead of attending Quidditch practice he would spend his evenings scrubbing cauldrons, gutting frogs, and preparing other ingredients. Oliver wasn't happy to hear that his brand new Seeker would be missing his first week of practice but understood how Snape could be. He arranged a set separate one-on-one practices for him and Harry to hopefully make up for some of the lost time.

Fred and George were Ron's older twin brothers. They helped Harry when Oliver was busy. These practices were a lot more fun, as the twins liked to joke around. Harry learned after his first practice with them to check inside his boots. Fred hid a glob of frog spawn in the bottom of Harry's right boot while he wasn't looking. He only discovered when his foot made a wet squelch.

September faded into October. The weather became cooler and rainier. Harry's free time was limited, lost to homework or Quidditch practice. It was a really good thing he was friends with Hermione, or there was no way he could have kept up with his classes, especially the week he had detention on top of practice and homework.

Halloween morning the castle woke up to the smell of baking pumpkins. There was to be a feast that night. Harry like many of his fellow first years was looking forward to it. But the meal wasn't the only thing they were anticipating. Professor Flitwick had announced at the end of their previous lesson he thought they had a good enough handle on the basics they could start learning to make things fly.

He split the room into pairs, Harry with Seamus, Hermione with Ron, Neville with Dean. Each pair was given a feather they were to try and make float off their desks. Professor Flitwick reminded everyone of the pronunciation of the incantation, 'Wingardium Leviosa', and to swish and flick. The pairs set to work.

Seamus lost patience and jabbed the feather with his wand, setting it on fire. Neville and Dean didn't seem to be having much better luck, but no flames as of yet.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry's could hear Hermione criticizing Ron on his other side. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snapped.

Hermione rolled up her sleeves, flicked her wand, said, "Windgardium Leviosa!" The feather rose to four feet off the desk.

"Oh, look everyone Miss Granger's done it!" Professor Flitwick praised.

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of class. Hermione had stayed behind a moment to talk to Professor Flitwick, so Harry and Neville were walking back to Gryffindor Tower with Ron, Seamus, and Dean.

"It's no wonder nobody can stand her," Ron complained, "she's a nightmare, honesty."
"I don't think," Harry started to say.

"She only helps you out because you're famous. She's got no real friends." Ron insisted.

Hermione pushed past the boys, crying.

"I think she heard you," Harry snapped.

Harry followed after her but stopped when she disappeared into a girls' lavatory. He shifted his bag nervously, before shaking his head and going back to the Tower. Harry heard from one of the girls Hermione hadn't come out of the bathroom since this afternoon but forgot about his friend's upset as they sat down to dinner.

The Great Hall was splendidly decorated, live bats on the walls and ceiling, huge jack-o-lanterns. The food appeared magical onto gold plates as it had at the welcoming feast. Professor Quirrell came running into the Great Hall, his face ashen, turban askew.

"Troll! Troll in the dungeon! Just thought you ought to know." He exclaimed before passing out in a dead faint.

Professor Dumbledore had to let off several sparks from his wand to be heard over the frightened screams of the student body. "Prefects will lead your Houses back to your dormitories immediately!"

Ron's older brother, Percy, one of the Gryffindor prefect instantly took charge. As they were leaving the Great Hall that it occurred to Harry that Hermione didn't know about the troll.

Harry got Neville's attention, "Hermione doesn't know about the troll."

"We should tell a teacher," Neville urged.

Harry nodded. They fell back behind their group on the second floor temporarily joining a group of Hufflepuffs heading the other way. Before they could find a teacher, however, they spotted the troll. It was twelve feet tall, with dull grey skin. Its huge feet were horny, attached to short legs thick as tree trunks. Behind it, it drug a huge wooden club. Harry had never smelled something so foul. It was heading straight for the lavatory where Hermione was hiding.

"Oh no," Neville groaned.

"Come on Neville," Harry said running toward the bathroom. Neville followed, but with much less haste. He cast a glance around the corridor just in case professor might appear.

His pace picked up when he heard Hermione scream. Hermione was curled in the back of one of the stalls. The troll smashed the stall just two down from her. Harry stood at the door.

"What should we do?" Neville asked nervously.

"We need to distract it," Harry said.

He picked up a chunk of wood and threw it at the troll's tiny head. Neville followed suit. The troll turned toward the boys, his club coming down and smashing a ceramic sink.

"Uh, Harry..." Neville began.

Harry threw another chunk of wood at the troll. Its club came at the boys this time. Harry grabbed hold of it. The troll picked it up, Harry hung from it, before falling onto its shoulders.
"Do something," Harry pleaded.

"What?" Neville called.

"Anything," Harry yelled back as the troll shook his head back and forth trying to shake him off. His hand slipped, his wand going up the troll's nose. Neville drew his wand, unsure what to do.

"Swish and flick," Hermione instructed.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Neville said flicking his wand.

The troll's club hung in the air for the moment before coming down on its head. Harry held on as it came crashing down. Harry removed his wand from the troll's nose. Thick grey boogers clung to it.

"Yuck troll boogies," Harry whined as he rubbed them on his robes.

The door banged opened revealing Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Flitwick.

"My word!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "Would you care to explain what happened here?"

"Uh... We heard about the troll...and...we were trying going to tell..." Harry began.

"It's my fault," Hermione spoke up. "I wasn't at the feast. Harry and Neville came to tell me about it. I'm sure they would have gotten one of you, but before they had a chance to, they saw it heading in here."

"Then Harry distracted it and jumped on his back," Neville added.

"Then Neville used its own club to knock it out," Harry finished.

"It's not every year you meet three students, first years at that, capable of defeating a full-grown mountain troll. Five points each to Gryffindor for sheer dumb luck," Professor McGonagall rewarded, brogue particularly thick.

"Miss Granger a word, please." Hermione followed Professor McGonagall out of the room.

"Professor Flitwick, will you please escort Mr. Longbottom back to his common room, I would like a word with Mr. Potter," Professor Snape inquired.

"Come along Mr. Longbottom, you can tell exactly how you managed to knock out this troll," Professor Flitwick said gesturing for the boy to come with him.

"Yes sir," Neville mumbled, flushing red.

"Care to explain yourself, Potter?" Professor Snape asked once they were alone. Harry looked down at his shoes. He noticed there was blood on the professor's leg. The boy only shook his head.

"Were Miss Granger's assurances correct? Were you and Longbottom were going to get an adult before you rushed in like a drunken hippogriff?"

Harry's head shot up, "Yes, sir. But like she said, the troll..."

The professor nodded. "You should have informed one of us before you left the Great Hall."

"Err... I didn't think about until we got to the second floor," Harry admitted.
"And failed to run into a prefect between there and the lavatory?" Professor Snape inquired.

Harry shook his head, "We didn't see anybody."

"Very well, but I would prefer not to have these sorts of discussions in the future. Now back to your dormitory, they are finishing the festivities up there." Professor Snape said dismissing the boy.

When Harry got to the door he stopped him, "And Mr. Potter, that will be another week's detention. With your pension for trouble, perhaps you should advise Mr. Wood to have a backup Seeker available." Professor Snape remarked, a ghost of a smirk on his lips.

"Yes sir," Harry grumbled, though he couldn't feel too bad about it, not when things could have gone so much worse.
Harry told Hermione and Neville about Professor Snape's bloody leg when he talked to Harry after the incident with the troll. They all wondered how he could have hurt it. Neville thought he remembered Professor Flitwick saying Professor Snape was checking things on the third-floor corridor, the one they were told during the Welcoming Feast it was strictly off limits; unless you wanted to die a painful death.

Harry's first Quidditch match was memorable for several reasons, one being that instead of catching the snitch, he nearly swallowed it. More importantly, somebody hexed Harry's broom. It tried to buck him off. Harry spent a moment hanging for dear life before he was able to remount it. That's when Hermione started to worry. She explained to Harry about how jinxes worked, how you have to keep eye contact and Snape wasn't blinking.

Harry refused to believe the Potions Master was cursing his broom. If Professor Snape wanted to hurt him wouldn't he have done it already? He's been alone with him enough with all those detentions.

Still, Hermione wasn't so sure. When you put it together with his anger of Hagrid telling Snape and Harry about collecting something from the high-security vaults the same day. She wasn't so sure the professor was trying to protect was there, but to steal it.

The trio's investigation into what the professor may or may not have been doing on the third floor was put on pause with the holiday's arrival. Harry was the first to sign up to stay at the castle over the holidays when Professor McGonagall came around with the sheet. Hermione was going to spend the break with her parents skiing. Neville was going home to his gran. A lot of his other family came to visit during the holidays including his Great Uncle Algie, the one who once dropped him out a window trying to get Neville to display his magic.

Harry wasn't alone in the Tower, however. The Weasleys stayed for the break as well. Their parents and younger sister, Ginny, went to Romania to visit the second oldest, Charlie, who was studying dragons at a preserve.

The holiday break started wonderfully. A fresh layer of snow covered the grounds. Fred and George enchanted a couple of snowballs to bounce against Professor Quirrell's turban. The days were spent in front of the fire in the nice comfortable armchairs there was no competition getting.

Harry ran into Hagrid one afternoon when he needed a break from everyone. Harry had first gone up to the owlery, but Hedwig was asleep. He then went on a walk of the grounds. Hagrid found him near the edge of the lake.

Harry followed Hagrid back to his small wooden house on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was an octagonal shaped building with a thatch roof. A large bed took up a majority of the space. Hagrid boiled water for tea in the biggest copper kettle Harry had ever seen. Hagrid's boarhound, Fang placed his head on Harry's knee, drooling on his robes.

"How's yer year going, Harry?" Hagrid asked putting a bucket sized cup of tea in front of the boy.

"It's okay," Harry replied taking a sip of tea.
Hagrid pushed forward a plate of rock cakes. Harry looked at them suspiciously but took one to be polite. When he took a bite his suspensions were confirmed, the cake nearly broke his teeth. Harry set aside, trying not to massage his sore jaw.

"Yer not havin' any trouble with yer classes? With Quidditch an' all?"

Harry shook his head. "No, Hermione helps me when I'm having trouble. She makes sure I get everything done on time, reminding me what's due and things." Luckily his sore jaw didn't affect his speech too much.

"No, yeh'd have no problems with the material. Not with Lily and James as yer mum and dad. They were some of the most talented witch and wizard of their age." Hagrid said chuckling. His warm beetle black eyes sparkled with fond remembrance.

"Really?" Harry asked. He knew so little about his parents. He loved when people told him things he didn't know about them, which was pretty much everything. Except when Professor Snape talked about his dad. He never had nice things to say about him.

"O' course, Head Boy and Girl in their year," Hagrid confirmed. "Yer a lot like yer dad, Harry. Yeh look jus' like 'im, except fer the eyes. Yeh got yeh mum's eyes. Yeh, dad was a great flyer. He played quidditch fer Gryffindor too. Got inta a fair bit of trouble when he was in school. He never met a greater rule breaker, well, maybe Fred an' George Weasley."

"Hagrid," Harry asked. "Do you know why Professor Snape's leg was bleeding on Halloween?"

"That was jus' Fluffy," Hagrid told him.

"Who's Fluffy?" Harry asked confused.

"Me dog. I leant 'im ter Dumbledore door ter do a bit o' guardin'. He don' like people botherin' him. There's been more than just me checkin' in on 'im. They don't know how to calm 'im he'll bite. Bleedin' fools ferget the music...Ferget I said tha. Ferget I said tha'."

"Guarding what?" Harry asked innocently.

"That's none of yeh business. What that dog is guardin' is between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel." Then drawn on what he had said. "I shouldn't'a said tha' I shouldn't'a said tha'," Hagrid grumbled to himself. "Yeh ferget I mentioned that name, Harry. It's not fer students teh know. Nothin' yeh need teh worry about."

"Okay," Harry said completely insincere.

He spent another hour or so with Hagrid. The giant told him stories about his own time at Hogwarts. It was then Harry learned his friend was expelled during his third year but refused to tell Harry why.

Hagrid also told him a few stories about his parents while at school. This included an amusing one about his dad getting Peeves to help him lock all of Slytherin House out of their dorm for half the night. He didn't even get detention for it, the Head of House was so impressed with the magic.

After Harry said his farewells for the evening he headed straight for the library. He could have sworn he'd seen that name somewhere. He really wished Hermione was back. She was so much better at this sort of thing.
Harry spent the next several days looking through all sorts of books with no success. Frustrated he shoved a book across the table. Madam Pince gave him a dirty look. It was then a thought occurred to Harry. Maybe he was looking in the wrong place, maybe the book he was looking for was in the Restricted Section. How could he get in there? No teacher would give him a note. He'd have to explain what and why he needed it before they could tell him no.

Harry was not looking forward to Christmas morning like his fellow Gryffindors. He fully expected the Dursleys would not send him any sort of present, so there was no sort of anticipation.

"I've got presents," Harry observed out loud to himself on Christmas morning.

"Of course," Ron said as he ripped open one of his packages. "Looks like you got one from my mum even."

Harry looked confused until Ron pointed at a bulky package wrapped in brown paper.

"She's made you a Weasley sweater," Ron explained. "She makes all of us one every Christmas." He found his own package. He pulled back the paper, with a groan. "I hate maroon."

Harry pulled forward his package. Removing the paper he discovered an emerald green sweater with a golden snitch on the chest.

"I didn't expect to get anything," Harry said dumbfounded.

The door burst open a moment later. Fred and George wore blue sweaters that each bore their first initial.

"Ahhhh, young Harry I see Mum sent you a Weasley sweater," Fred observed.

Harry nodded, "She didn't have to," the boy protested.

"We told Mum you didn't think you would get any presents and here you go," George explained. "Come and put it on, they're nice lovely and warm. You too Ron, we're all wearing them."

"I hate maroon," Ron whined.

Harry pulled on the sweater over his pajamas. George was right, they were very nice and warm. Percy came in a few minutes later, the twins forced him into his own sweater, much to his annoyance.

Harry went back to opening his gifts. Along with the sweater, Mrs. Weasley included a box of homemade fudge. It was really good. Hermione gave him a large box of Bertie Bot's Every Flavor Beans. Neville got him a box of Chocolate Frogs, a treat he introduced Harry and Hermione to on the train to Hogwarts. He also explained about people collecting the cards that came with them. Harry had almost a dozen now, including his first, Albus Dumbledore. Hagrid gave Harry a flute he must have carved himself.

Under all of these Harry located the Dursleys' present, a fifty pence piece, and a tissue. That was the worst gift they had given him. It was even worse than the old pair of Uncle Vernon's socks he got a couple years before.
Fred and George dragged everybody downstairs not long after for breakfast. This was followed by a
many hour-long snowball fight, then Ron trying to teach Harry to play wizard's chest back in the
Gryffindor Common Room.

The game was exactly the same as the Muggle version except the pieces were alive. They
would move their new spot on their own. When another piece was captured the capture would
violently remove them from their spot. Harry wasn't very good yet. It didn't help that the set he was
using, borrowed from Seamus didn't trust him and kept yelling advice at him.

Harry got a new set of chessmen in a Christmas cracker he pulled with George. He broke them in by
losing spectacularly to Ron with the aide of Percy. All in all, it had been Harry's best Christmas ever.
It wasn't until he was climbing into bed he realized he missed a present that morning. Harry was
going to ask Ron if it was there this morning, but the other boy across the room was already snoring.

It was wrapped in a plain paper, but there was no card. Harry opened not curiously. Inside was a
shimmery piece of fabric. Harry ran a hand over the soft material. It was cool to the touch, his fingers
found a small card tucked inside. In a slanting, delegate hand, the giver wrote,"Your father left this in
my possession not long before he died. It's time it was returned to you. Use it well. A very merry
Christmas to you."

Harry stared at the card. He read it through two more times. Was something of his father's, really?
What could it be? What did they mean, use it well? He set the card down and took the fabric from its
package.

There was a lot of it. It was a cloak! But what did they mean, use it well? Harry stood and pulled it
on over his shoulders. He looked down to see how much it covered...his body was gone! The cloak
made him invisible!

Use it well? That must be why they would say something like that. What could he do with this? The
Restricted Section, of course, maybe he could find a book about Flamel in there. No one would
know he went in there if they couldn't see him.

Harry made sure to stay quiet so not to wake up Ron. He grabbed a lantern and headed for the
library. He crept as quietly as possible. He ran across Mrs. Norris, Mr. Flitch's nasty cat about
halfway there. He was tempted to kick her just this once. She watched Harry as if she could still see
him, that could it be possible. Could it?

Harry crossed into the Restricted Section nervously. He held up the lantern closer trying to read the
titles on the spines, but he didn't know exactly what he was looking for. He grabbed a very old
looking book and it flopped open. It let out a blood curling scream. Harry slammed it shut, but
dropped his lantern panicked.

"Who's there?"

It was Flitch, the foul-tempered custodian. Harry back out of the library as quietly as possible. He
took off at a run only to nearly crash into Professor Snape. Harry froze.

"Professor," Flitch wheezed coming up behind Harry. "I found this in the Restricted Section just
now. It's still warm. Means a student's out of bed."

Harry held his breath hoping they couldn't sense his presence. The two adults stayed for a moment
before taking off back toward the library. Harry headed the opposite direction. He got lost wandering
the dark corridors. He stumbled into an abandoned classroom.

In the center of it stood an ornate mirror. It was about six feet tall with strange writing across the top. Harry dropped his Invisibility Cloak and stood in front of it and gazed at his reflection that was not alone.

In the mirror Harry stood with a tall man, whose glasses were cockeyed, his hair messy and sticking up in random places just like Harry's and a woman she had long red hair, a friendly face, and eyes just like Harry's.

"Mum?" Harry asked.

She nodded.

"Dad?"

The man nodded. Harry looked behind him, no he was alone, but his parents were with him somehow. They were joined by many others. Harry could tell by their shared features they too were his family.

Harry stayed there for many hours.

The next night, Harry stayed up waiting for his roommate for fall asleep. He had briefly considered bringing Ron with him, but it was so special he wanted to back alone once more. He could spend that little bit of time with the parents he never knew. He didn’t exactly how to find the room. He went around a dark corner and crashed into something.

“Reveal yourself,” Professor Snape commanded.

Harry didn’t move, maybe he could just back up and he could get away.

Snape drew his wand, “Now.”

“It’s only me,” Harry said pulling back the hood to show his disembodied head.

“Potter,” Snape hissed. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“I was going to see my parents,” Harry said honestly.

“What are you on about, Potter?”

“Come with me, you can see them too. I’m telling the truth, honest.” Harry said removing the rest of the cloak.

It took them awhile to find the right classroom. The corridors looked different by the light of the professor’s wand and Harry not desperately running away, trying not to be caught by the staff. It was Professor Snape that opened the right door some quarter of an hour after their collision. There it was, the tall mirror standing alone in the center of the room.

Harry approached it, “Look here. There’s my mum,” pointing to the left, pointing to the right, “and my dad.”
“I do not see them,” Snape said looking at the mirror. He slowly walked around it.

“You wouldn’t from there,” Harry said with a roll of his eyes.

“That’s enough of your check, Potter. I am still a professor and can still take points.”

“Yes sir,” Harry said standing up a little bit straighter.

Snape came to stand next to the boy

“See, there they are,” Harry said pointing again.

“I still see nothing,” Snape said after a moment.

“Stand here,” Harry encouraged.

They were only a few inches from the glass, the boy moved aside so his teacher could stand directly in front of the looking glass. The man moved into the now open space.

“Lily,” Snape breathed falling to his knees, as he ran a hand over the glass.

Harry stepped awkwardly back from his distraught professor. Harry didn’t know what to say. He had no idea what the man was seeing. Other than Harry’s mother, apparently. He waited until the man seemed to have collected himself.

“Sir, are you okay?” Harry asked anxiously.

Snape stood up once more, “I am fine.” He straightened his robe, “It is late. You must return to your dormitory. I will escort you.”

“Yes sir,” Harry said not brave enough to argue. The two walked back in a heavy silence, stopping in front of the portrait of The Fat Lady.

The two walked back in a heavy silence, stopping in front of the portrait of The Fat Lady.

"Potter," the professor said, waiting for the boy’s full attention. “Hope I never catch you out of bed again.”

Harry didn’t want to disappoint Professor Snape, but, he really wanted to see his parents again. He couldn’t explain this desire to anyone. It was all looked forward to these last two nights. Harry made it to the room again for the third night in a row, alone once more. Or he thought he was alone until someone cleared their throat. Harry spun around terrified. It was the headmaster.

"Sir," Harry said nervously.

"Good evening, Harry." Professor Dumbledore greeted. "I see you’ve discovered like many before you the delights the Mirror of Erised."

Harry nodded.

"Do you know what this mirror shows us, Harry?"
"It's not our pasts," Harry guessed.

"No," Dumbledore agreed. "Let me help you. If the happiest man on Earth were to stand in front of this mirror they could use it like any other."

"So it shows you something you want?" Harry asked.

"It shows us nothing more than our deepest most heartfelt desire," the headmaster elaborated. "But it gives us neither knowledge nor truth. Harry, the mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow. I must ask you not to go looking for it."

"Yes sir," Harry acknowledged.

The headmaster was at the door when Harry blurted, "Can I ask you a question... Sir?"

"You already have, but continue," the old man said smiling.

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I see myself holding a pair of nice woolen socks. Another Christmas has passed and not a single pair. Everyone insists upon buying me books." The man chuckled lightly. "Come now, it's late. Back to bed, my dear boy."

Harry gave one last look to the mirror, "Okay."

When Hermione and Neville returned a few days later Harry told them about trying to find the book about Flamel and stumbling on the mirror.

"Harry, you shouldn't have done that. You could have gotten in so much trouble," Hermione chastised.

"It's fine, Hermione." Harry dismissed.

"But Dumbledore..." Neville protested.

With both of his friends were surprised that the headmaster hadn’t punished for his nighttime wanderings, he was very glad he hadn’t mentioned taking Professor Snape to see the mirror with him. Neither of them trusted the Potions Master the way Harry did. They only saw the man that took points from Harry for no reason. They never heard the man trying to get Harry think through his actions, or use the proper word for things. Harry knew the extra detentions were the man’s way of trying to teach Harry the lessons he thought he needed to make those changes. Still, he could see why others would think he was being unfair.

Harry was two minutes late for his first Potions’ lessons back from the holidays because Wood stopped him in the hall to talk over strategy for the upcoming match.

"Detention Potter," Professor Snape snapped not bothering to turn around.

Harry flung his bag down moodily. How was that fair? He was two minutes late. Hermione gave him a knowing look. It wasn't until class ended that it made sense to Harry.

“For your nighttime explorations,” Snape explained once it was only Harry and himself in the room.
“But that was Christmas,” Harry began to protest, but a raised an eyebrow stopped him in his tracks. "Yes, sir."

"Tonight at seven, Potter." Professor Snape told him.

Harry's surprise was evident.

"We can't deny Gryffindor their Seeker in tomorrow's match, can we? You need all the help you can get defeating Slytherin. It's no fun rubbing Professor McGonagall's face in her house’s ineptitude if there is no real competition." Professor Snape explained.

Harry found Wood at dinner to tell him about it.

"You can't give him a chance to punish you like that, Harry." Wood brusquely. "We need you to be there if we have a chance of winning the Cup."

"Sorry Oliver," Harry apologized.

"Just do your best not do it in the future," Oliver pleaded.

"Mr. Potter, a word," Professor McGonagall said joining the boys.

Harry followed the Deputy Headmistress out of the Great Hall and into the corridor. Harry shifted nervously.

"Professor Snape informed me at dinner you have detention with him again," she elaborated.

“Err... Yes, ma'am. I was a couple of minutes late for Potions.” Harry confirmed.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall sighed. "At this rate, you'll spend more time in detention than your father."

"Sorry," Harry apologized.

"Make sure you don't get into any more trouble tonight, Potter." Professor McGonagall said dismissed him.

Harry rushed down to the dungeons to make sure he wasn't late. He couldn't get in more trouble, not when both Oliver and his Head of House were upset with him about it. He didn't want to lose his place on the team.

As far as things could go, the detention wasn't too bad. Instead of the normal preparation of ingredients or scrubbing cauldrons, Harry spent two hours copying out all the rules he broke when sneaking into the Restricted Section, (Harry didn’t confess to doing this, but was smart enough not argue the point) and for being out after curfew.

"Perhaps that way they might sink in," Professor Snape grumbled as he set Harry to his task.

Wood got the whole team up early the next morning to go over tactics and things they didn't cover during the practice the night before since Harry was missing. The team glared at Harry as Wood rambled on about Hufflepuff's defense style. They broke to get breakfast, Wood encouraged his team
to eat, while not doing so himself.

They headed down to the pitch as the first students made their way into the Great Hall. Wood was just starting to discuss Hufflepuff’s Seeker when there was a knock on the changing room door.

Harry could hear it was Professor McGonagall, but couldn't make out what she was saying. Oliver returned a moment, a deep frown on his face.

"What's wrong?" Angelina Johnson asked.

"There's been a change. Professor Snape is going to referee the match." Oliver informed his team.

"Snape!" George demanded.

"Since when does Snape referee Quidditch!" Fred added.

"There's no way he'll be fair," Katie Bell pointed out.

"I know. I know," Oliver agreed, "but there is nothing we can do about it. Harry, we need you to catch that snitch as quickly as possible. Don't give Snape too much time to favor the Hufflepuffs."

Harry nodded.

"Come on," Oliver urged his team out onto the field.

The air was crisp a few clouds in the sky. It was perfect Quidditch weather. Oliver and the Hufflepuff team captain shook hands. The teams mounted their brooms, Professor Snape blew the whistle and they were off.

Harry cast his eye around for the tiny gold ball. He heard the professor call a foul for Hufflepuff when Fred sent a Bludger at his head. Harry flew higher in his search. Another foul was called on Katie for no reason at all.

Then he saw it. Harry went into a steep dive, flying right past the professor to catch the snitch. The game ended, Gryffindor 150 to Hufflepuff 30. It was the shortest match in anybody's memory.

The victory put Gryffindor in the lead for the Quidditch Cup for the first time since Charlie Weasley graduated. The party in Gryffindor Tower lasted into early hours of the morning. It only ended when Professor McGonagall came in and ordered everyone to bed.

Harry found something unexpected when he was getting ready for bed. On his pillow was a small piece of parchment folded in half. Harry couldn't help but smile as he read it. written in a familiar spidery scrawl,

"Good job, Potter. SS"
The next several months passed by quickly. Harry wished he could spend all day flying. But he still had classes and around Easter Break Hermione started making up study schedules for herself, Harry, and Neville. It was hard to believe their first year at Hogwarts was coming to an end.

Harry and his fellow students would soon be taking their exams. Percy was taking his O.W.L.s which covered everything they had learned over the last five years. These tests were very important Hermione explained. How you did on them affected what classes you could take and even your career choices after Hogwarts.

That was too far away to think about for Harry. He was more concerned about remembering the incantation for lighting his wand and making sure his pin cushion didn't run away in terror like it had this morning in Transfiguration. He just wanted to pass these exams and enjoy his summer holidays, as much as he could at the Dursleys'.

The exams were not the only thing between Harry and his summer. They were still trying to figure out who Nicolas Flamel, until Draco jinxed Neville one afternoon, Neville bunny hopped in the Gryffindor Common Room. Draco had come across the other boy in the corridor. He was looking for somebody to practice the Leg-Locker Curse on. Neville just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Harry gave his friend the last of the chocolate frogs he received for Christmas as Hermione worked to unstick his legs.

"Do you want the card," Neville asked taking it from the bottom of the carton.

Harry took it, "Dumbledore again. He was the first one I ever got." Harry flipped it over to the back. He groaned in frustration.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked straightening up.

Harry passed her the card.

She read out loud,"'Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!'" She spoke faster as she read. "That's it! We've found him!" She took off up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

The boys shared a confused look. Hermione returned moments later a huge leather-bound book under one arm.

"I picked this up last week for a little light reading," she said setting it on the table in front of Harry. Hermione read, "The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal. There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist, and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight)."
"You see what this means don't you?" Hermione asked.

Neville shook his head.

"The thing Fluffy is guarding, the thing they're trying to steal, it's the Sorcerer's Stone," Harry concluded.

"Who would want to do that?" Neville asked.

"I can think of one," Harry said.

"Who?"

"Voldemort," Harry replied.

Both Hermione and Neville gasped. They had never heard him say the name.

"But he's gone, Harry." Hermione protested. "You defeated him."

"But he still has followers," Harry insisted.

"That's different than it being You-Know-Who," Neville argued.

"Didn't your gran say that it must have been dark wizards who broke into Gringotts? The break-in was the same day as Hagrid got something at the bank. He told us he was doing an errand for Dumbledore." Harry continued.

"Still that doesn't mean it's You-Know-Who," Hermione countered. "Who at Hogwarts would want to steal it?"

"Hagrid said Professor Snape was bitten by Fluffy. He was trying to get into where it was guarding." Neville said.

"And he wasn't muttering and wouldn't break eye contact," Hermione added.

"I don't think it was him," Harry said shaking his head. "And why would he try to kill me at the Quidditch match? If he wanted to kill me he could have done it then."

"Harry," Hermione insisted.

"My gran said he was a Death Eater," Neville added.

"Death Eater?" Harry asked confused.


"Why would Dumbledore let him teach if he was a Death Eater?" Harry asked.

Neville shrugged.

Hermione shook her head. "Harry, you have to admit, it doesn't look good."
"Then who else would steal it?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Harry huffed.

"Maybe we should keep an eye on him," Neville suggested.

Hermione and Harry stared at their friend.

"If he is trying to steal the Stone, we can find out when he's going to do it. If it isn't him, maybe we'll figure out who is," proposed Neville.

"Okay," they agreed.

This plan was much easier in theory than practice. They all had classes they needed to attend. Harry had Quidditch practice that was being stepped up with the approaching match. Which meant it was up to Neville and Hermione most of the time, but they often for chased off by Filch, or lost Snape when he went into the teachers' lounge.

Harry's confidence that it wasn't Professor Snape was shaken a few days into their surveillance routine. He was the last to put away his broom after Quidditch practice. He heard Professor Snape's voice and stepped a bit closer to see he could make out the words. He could just see him when he peaked around the corner of the shed.

"...d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet, Severus..." Quirrell stuttered.

Why would Professor Snape want to talk to Quirrell and behind the pitch? Harry didn't have to wait long for his answer.

"I thought it was best if we keep this private." Said, Snape. "Have you found how to get past Hagrid's beast yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I --"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell." Professor Snape said taking a step closer to the trembling Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

"I-I don't know what you --"

"How about your little bit of hocus-pocus? I'm waiting."

"B-b-but I d-d-don't---"

"Very well," Professor Snape snapped, "We'll have another chat in a little soon when you've had time to think where your loyalties lie."

Harry dashed back to Gryffindor Tower. He found Neville and Hermione tucked into a back corner of the Common Room studying for their exams. Harry told them everything he had overhead.

"Harry, this isn't good. I know you don't want to believe it's Professor Snape, but think about it." Hermione urged.

"I know," Harry conceded.
"Snape, Voldemort, or whoever is that's trying to steal the Stone isn't going to take it, not while Dumbledore is here," Neville interjected.

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Haven't you ever heard, Dumbledore was the only person You-Know-Who ever feared?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. That put him at ease for awhile. Instead, he worried about passing his exams and beating Ravenclaw for the Quidditch Cup.

He didn't remember much of that first exam week. His head hurt more than it ever had before. It wasn't a normal headache, though. It seemed to be centered around his scar. He rubbed it ideally at dinner the evening of their final exam.

"Are you alright," Hermione asked watching the agitated motion.

"My head hurts," Harry confessed.

"Go see Madam Pomfrey," Neville suggested.

Harry shook his head. "I think it's a warning."

"Warning about what?"

"Danger is coming," Harry said casting a gaze up to the Head Table. "Dumbledore's gone."

Hermione and Neville looked up too. The Headmaster was missing from his center seat.

"Maybe he just left early," Neville suggested.

Harry got up from the table, his friends following close behind.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked.

"We need to find out if Dumbledore is really gone," Harry stated. He looked around the entrance hall. "Does anybody know where Dumbledore's office is?"

Both his friends shook their heads.

"What are you three doing loitering out here?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"We need to talk to Professor Dumbledore," Hermione answered for them.

The Deputy Headmistress raised a questioning eyebrow. "And why is that Miss Granger?"

"It's sort of a secret," Hermione said lamely.

Harry's tactic was completely different. He said, "We think somebody is going to try and steal the Sorcerer's Stone."
It was obvious that whatever she was expecting them to say it wasn't that. "How do... I don't know how you know about the Stone. Professor Dumbledore was summoned to London by an urgent message from the Minister of Magic. You need not worry. The Stone is well protected. Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow. Now off to bed with you."

"He's going to go tonight," Harry said as they climbed the stairs back to the Tower.

"What are we going to do?" Hermione asked.

"I'm going to get the Stone before they can steal it," Harry told her. "I'm going to get my dad's cloak and get passed Fluffy, and whatever else it might take."

"You're not going alone," Neville told him, his trembling voice betrayed his bold statement. "We're coming with you."

Hermione nodded.

"You don't have to," Harry objected.

"Harry, we're your friends not just when it's easy," Hermione told him.

"Fine, we go as soon as the Common Room clears," Harry told them.

Hermione spent the rest of the evening reading the same three lines in her Transfiguration text. Harry halfheartedly watched Neville play Ron Weasley to a stalemate in their chess match. Finally, the three of them were the only ones left in the Common Room. Harry waited about half an hour to go and get his Invisibility Cloak. After a second's thought grabbed the flute Hagrid gave him for Christmas.

The walk down to the forbidden corridor was tricky. They had to move slowly to make sure if they were to run across somebody nobody could see any of their shoes. Other than that the trip went relatively smoothly. They didn't run across anyone, not even Mrs. Norris. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad.

Hermione unlocked the door to the corridor. Hagrid said Fluffy was a dog, what he failed to mention was Fluffy was a giant dog with three heads. Currently, all three heads were fast asleep on its front paws. The paws partly covered a trapdoor. Somebody had charmed a harp to play in the corner.

"Who goes first?" Neville asked.

Harry volunteered.

"No, I'll go," Hermione said stepping forward.

Neville helped her push the giant dog's toe off the door. "Good luck," he whispered.

"You too," she said and jumped through.

Harry nodded and followed. There was a snuffling sound. It occurred to him the harp had stopped playing. Harry looked up and met eyes with three snarling snouts. Harry pulled out the flute and began to play. Fluffy's eyes began to flutter shut. It wasn't another minute before he was asleep again. Harry followed his friends into the unknown.
Harry fell for what like miles before landing with a soft thump. He patted the soft organic mat. It was thick cords of vine he could feel.

"It's Devil Snare," Neville yelled from below. Herbology was probably the only class Neville was stronger than Hermione. "Relax and it will let you through."

That was easier said than done as the vines were now uncomfortably tight around Harry's chest.

"He isn't relaxing," Hermione observed.

Neville shook his head. "Devil Snare doesn't like light or heat. We need sunlight...or fire."

Hermione waved her wand a conjured a ball of blue flames, a trick she perfected for cold wintery days. Harry's landing this time around was far less pleasant as he hit the stone floor. Neville helped him to his feet.

"Thanks," Harry said dusting himself off. "It's good you're great at Herbology, Neville."

Neville shrugged. "Hermione would have figured it out."

Harry nodded, "Let's keep going."

They passed a room with a passed out troll in it.

"Glad we don't have to fight this one too," Harry remarked as they moved down the hallway.

As they walked a sound like thousands of birds flying around grew louder. The trio worked to the door it wouldn't budge, not even with Hermione's Alohamora.

Harry looked at what was flapping above then again. They weren't birds, but keys.

"We have to find the one that fits the lock," Harry surmised.

"But how?" Hermione demanded.

"We'll need brooms."

Neville handed him an old broom, "It's the only one."

Harry looked at the lock, "The keys probably an old fashioned one." He found it flying twenty feet or so above them. One of its blue wings bent. "That's it!" Harry exclaimed pointing it out to the others.

"Go, Harry," Hermione urged.

Harry chased the key through the swarm of keys. He dodged obstacles before he could wrap his fingers around the struggling bit of metal and feather. Harry flew low passing the key off to Neville to open the door.

The three walked into a dark chamber whose torches sprung to life when they stepped foot into a giant chessboard. They tried walking across but were blocked by the white's pieces.
"We have to play our way across," Neville said taking in the room. "We'll have to take place of three of the pieces on the black side. Hermione take the kingside rook, Harry queen's bishop."

"What about you?" Harry asked.

"Me..." Neville paused for a moment, "me, I'll be the queen."

Hermione giggled at the absurdity of the comment. The three took their positions, then it was a matter of waiting for white to make its move. The game was no different than normal wizard's chess. It was just as violent. Harry, Hermione, and the stone pieces followed Neville's directions to checking the king. Harry could see the problem three moves before it happened.

"Neville," Harry said getting the boy's attention.

"No Harry, it has to happen." Neville objected. "It's the fastest way possible. I have to let the queen take me so you can checkmate the king."

Harry watched frozen as his friend was knocked to the marble game board by the opposite queen's scepter. His head making an unpleasant smacking sound as it made contact. Hermione screamed. Harry yelled at he to stay in place when she started to move. Harry walked forward to checkmate the king and end the game. The king dropped his sword and they went to check on their friend. He was knocked out cold and had a nasty gash on his forehead.

"Hermione, we need to keep going. He could be taking the Stone right now." Harry urged.

Hermione followed reluctantly behind Harry. The next room was as different as the last. There was a long table with a long series of bottles lined up down the length. They stepped forward and the door they just passed through went up in purple flames, the one in front of them was engulfed in black flames.

Hermione noticed the paper sitting in front of the bottles. She read it through it twice before beginning to laugh. Harry stared at her as if she was mad.

"It's not magic, it's logic," Hermione said regaining some of her composure. "Some of the greatest wizards don't have a morsel of logic, they'd be here forever."

"Can you figure it out?" Harry asked nervously.

Hermione nodded. "Give me a minute."

She walked up and down the table several times. She muttered as she picked up and then placed a bottle back on the surface. She read through the riddle once more before handing Harry one small glass jar.

"This one will take you forward." She said.

Harry looked at at the bottle there was barely one swallow left. "There's only enough for one."

"I know. Harry, go on. You have to be the one who does this. You are the only one who can stop him." Hermione told him.
"I'm not as good as you." Harry refused.


"Get Neville help, then find Professor McGonagall. Tell her what happened. She'll know how to get hold of Dumbledore." Harry directed.

Harry watched as she took a swallow of her own potion. She shutter, "I'm ok," she reassured with Harry's look of concern. She walked through the flames before Harry took his own and passed through the black flames.

Harry was relieved to see that it was not Professor Snape standing in the room before him. Who it was standing there was slightly surprising, however, it was Professor Quirrell. He was standing in front of the Mirror of Erised.

"But," Harry objected.

"Expecting somebody else, Potter? Severus perhaps," Quirrell asked turning to look at Harry. "Yes, he does seem more the type, always sneaking around. Whoever would suspect poor st-stuttering, bumbling Professor Quirrell with him around. He never trusted me, he was always suspicious, checking on me, never leaving me alone. He didn't realize I was never alone. Now, how does this work? I can see myself holding the Stone. Why don't I have it?" Quirrell mumbled to himself.

Harry looked passed him trying to find a way out. What could he do?

"I don't understand," Quirrell repeated. "Master?"

"Use the boy," a ghostly voice hissed.

Where was it coming from?

"Potter come here," Quirrell demanded.

Harry didn't move. Quirrell waved his hand and suddenly Harry moved toward him and stopped in front of the mirror.

"What do you see, Potter?"

Harry stared at his reflection. It was very different from the last time he looked in it; it was as if he was looking into any other mirror. What did he want more than anything? To get the Stone and prevent Quirrell from taking it. Harry's reflection smiled. Harry felt a small weight drop into his pocket.

"What do you see, Potter?" Quirrell repeated.

"Gryffindor just won the House Cup, I'm taking it from Dumbledore," Harry said.

"He lies," the voice whispered. "Let me speak with him."

"My Lord, you're not strong enough," Quirrell told the voice.
"Let me see him," the voice harsher this time.

Quirrell began to unwrap his turban. He didn't have hair under it. No, he had a misshapen face on the back of his head, the eyes were cold and red, the nose slits like a snake. It may have been the scariest thing Harry had seen.

"Harry Potter," the face of Lord Voldemort said, "I have not always been like this. After the spell backfired I was left barely alive, shadow and vapor, less than the meanest ghost, but I survived. I gathered my strength. I only had form when I share a body, but I have always been able to find hosts, animal or man. Quirrell has been drinking unicorn blood, making me stronger."

"When Quirrell found me in the forest of Albania on his travels I dissuade him of his foolish notions of good and evil. There is no such thing, there is only power. Your parents failed to see that. They died begging for their lives."

"Liar!" Harry yelled.

"True. Your father battled me bravely. He died trying to defend you and your mother and failed. Your mother did not need to die. She could have lived but chose to die. You can join me, Potter, become great."

"Never!" Harry said trying to run away.

"When you give him the Stone in your pocket I will be able to rebuild a body for myself. Now give it here, Potter."

Quirrell waved his hand and Harry tripped. With another wave, Harry moved back toward Quirrell. The man grabbed hold of his ankle, both Harry and Quirrell screamed. Quirrell's hands were covered in red boils.

"Master, what's happening?" Quirrell whined.

"Grab him! Take the Stone!" Voldemort ordered.

Quirrell tried again, but he let go instantly. Harry realized this was his chance. He turned grabbing hold of the professor's face. He just needed to hold on, just a little longer. Quirrell couldn't get the Stone. Quirrell couldn't...

Harry woke up confused. He was in a brightly lit room, lying in a bed. How did he get here? How long had he been here? He tried to sit up, he needed his glasses.

"Welcome back, Potter," Professor Snape greeted coolly.

Harry lay back down maybe this was just a dream and he was still in the chamber with Voldemort and Quirrell.

"Feigning sleep will not get you out of this, Potter. " The professor warned, he was closer now. Harry could feel him standing over his bed.

"Potter," the man repeated.

Harry cracked an eye open. The scowl was deeper than he had ever seen it. It was accompanied by a fire so hot Harry could feel it. He had never been in more trouble in his life, not even after he set that
boa constrictor loose on Dudley's birthday. Harry gulped.

"What sort of idiotic Gryffindor notion led you to be here, Potter," Professor Snape demanded.

"I...sir?" Harry asked confused.

"What happened in the chamber, Potter? Why were you there in the first place?"

"Oh," Harry mumbled. "We knew somebody was going to try and steal the Stone."

The professor raised one eyebrow in disbelief, "You took it upon yourselves, three first years, to protect the Stone from some unknown force? A stone which I might add was already protected by multiple layers of enchantments by some of the greatest witch and wizards of the modern era?"

Harry nodded. "We tried to tell Professor McGonagall that somebody was going to steal it, but she wouldn't believe us. With Professor Dumbledore gone we knew You-Know-Who was going to steal it. We had to do something."

"You did not." Professor Snape snapped. "When will you get it through your thick head, Potter? The world is not for you to save. You nearly died. Your mother's sacrifice would mean very little if you don't live to sit your O.W.L.s!"

Harry twirled a finger idly on the bed clothes. "Yes, sir."

"For your and your little friends' obtuse behavior I'm taking fifty points."

"Fifty!" Harry repeated.

"Each."

Harry's heart sank through the floor all the way to the entrance hall three floors below. There was no way Gryffindor could come back from that. Maybe with the Quidditch match? When was that? It was then Harry realized he still didn't know how long had passed since the chamber and how he got from there.

"Sir," Harry began to ask, but his teacher was quicker.

"If you desire to know the rest of what happened with the Dark Lord, I will leave you. The Headmaster wishes to speak with you. I am sure he will willingly answer any of your ridiculous questions."

"Yes, sir."

"I will leave you with this, Potter." The man came to stand so his face was mere inches from Harry, the man's voice was a deadly whisper. "If I ever hear of you doing something this foolhardy again, you will wish I never came for you on that pile of rocks. Your time at the Dursleys will seem like a Sunday walk in the park compared to your life at school."

Harry nodded in understanding. He would do his best to never do something like this again. He never again wanted to see that hurt and angry expression on his professor's face. The man nodded his acknowledgment and stood. Without another word to Harry, he headed off the ward, passing the headmaster on is way in. Harry watched as the two exchanged a few words before resuming their
previous courses.

"Ahhh, Harry it's good to see you awake," Dumbledore said taking a seat in the chair next to Harry's bed. "Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom will also be relieved to see you awake. They have barely left your side in last three days. What happened between you and Quirrell is a secret, so naturally, the whole school knows."

"It's been three days?" Harry asked.

"Yes, my boy. You are very lucky to be here at all." Dumbledore told him. "If we had not found you when we did it may have been too late."

"The Stone," Harry said.

"Not the Stone, you, Harry. We might have lost you. The Stone is safe, you were able to stop him. I've had a talk with Nicolas we have agreed it would be best if the Stone was destroyed."

"But without the Stone, he'll..." Harry couldn't finish his statement.

"Die," Dumbledore finished for him. "Yes, but when you have lived as long and full of a life as Nicolas, dying will be like going to sleep after a long day, a very long day."

"Sir, why couldn't Quirrell get the Stone from the mirror and why couldn't You-Know-Who touch me?" Harry asked.

"Call him by his name, Harry, Lord Voldemort. Fear in a name only increases fear in the thing itself. The Mirror was enchanted so only a person who wanted the Stone, but not to use it could retrieve it." Dumbledore leaned in and conspiratorially whispered, "Between the two of use, that was one of my more brilliant ideas, and that is saying something." He straightened back up and continued, "When your mother gave her life to protect you it left a mark."

Harry raised a hand to the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, but the old man shook his head. "No, this mark is an invisible one. It was love, Harry. As simple and wonderful as that is, Voldemort cannot understand it. You can not imagine the power of something you do not understand."

"Professor Snape is angry with me," Harry observed.

"Oh quite," Dumbledore agreed. "He was the first teacher Miss Granger ran across. He knew even before she spoke where you had gone. You owe him your life, my boy."

Harry looked down at the sheets embarrassed. He waited another moment to ask a question that had bothered him for months, "Why does Professor Snape hate my dad so much?"

Dumbledore smiled, "The professor and your father's relationship was rather like yours and young Mr. Malfoy. And then James did something unforgivable, he saved Severus' life."

Harry frown. "I don't understand."

"Perhaps it is something to ask Severus, at another time, obviously. Now, I must be going or Madam Pomfrey will ban me." Dumbledore stood, but stopped spotting a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, he picked it up and looked to Harry in invitation, the boy nodded. "I had the misfortune of running across a vomit-flavored one in my youth; since then I have quite lost my fancy for them. But
I think I will be safe with a nice toffee," he said popping a small caramel colored bean into his mouth. He smacked his lips a few times, "Alas, earwax."

Harry spent the next several days in the Hospital Wing, kept company by a long string of visitors. Madam Pomfrey banned Fred and George Weasley who tried to bring Harry a toilet seat, Hagrid came the first day, face streaked with tears, feeling horribly guilty. What he gave Harry on his visit was probably the greatest single gift had ever received, except for maybe his cloak. It was a photo album with pictures of his parents.

Madam Pomfrey released him from the Hospital Wing in time for the departing feast. Harry wasn't as excited as he thought he would be. Hermione and Neville told him how mad his fellow Gryffindors with the loss of points. Since classes had ended and Gryffindor lost the Quidditch Cup, there was no chance to make up the loss. They had gone from being in the lead and winning the House Cup, taking it from Slytherin who held it for the last five years, to last place.

Still, Harry joined his fellows in the Great Hall. The decoration were all done in green and silver, a large Slytherin banner hung over the head table. Harry wished he slap the smug look off of Malfoy's face. Professor Snape too looked overly proud.

Silence fell as Dumbledore stood, "Another year gone, I understand it is time the House Cup needs awarding and the points stand as thus, Gryffindor in fourth place, three hundred and twenty-two points; third place Hufflepuff with three hundred and sixty; in second place is Ravenclaw, with four hundred and twenty-six, and lastly, in first place Slytherin with four hundred and seventy-two." There were some scarce applauses as the victors were announced.

"Yes, well done Slytherin, but I feel there have been some recent events that need to be taken into account. First, to Mr. Neville Longbottom fifty points for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years." Neville went scarlet. He had never earned more than five points for their house.

"Second, to Miss. Hermione Granger for her cool of intellect under extreme pressure, I award Gryffindor fifty points." Hermione hid her face in her arms, so overwhelmed with emotion.

"To Mr. Harry Potter," the headmaster continued, Hermione's head popped up curiously, "for unspeakable nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor sixty points."

"We've won," Hermione whispered.

"Now, if I'm not mistaken, we are in order of some new decorations." With a clap of his hands the green and silver turned to red and gold, the snake became a rampant lion. The cheers in the hall were deafening. That was except for the Slytherins. Malfoy took off his hat and slammed it to the table. Professor Snape looked as if he was forced to swallow something, particularly foul tasting.

"Look at Snape's face," Ron pointed out. "I might worry about him hexing you if I were you, Harry."

Harry looked up at the Potions Master. Ron was right if he didn't know the man better, he would worry about a jinx finding him. Harry only shrugged. If possible, the scowl only got deeper.

The next morning the post arrived as normal. Hedwig, Harry’s snowy owl, the one he received from Hagrid on his birthday, came in carrying two letters for Harry; one from the Dursleys confirming they would be at King’s Cross that afternoon to meet the train; the next labeled not to be read until
aboard the train. Harry tucked it into an inside pocket to do as he was told.

Harry forgot about the letter until after the lunch trolley had passed. He removed a piece of parchment containing a series of numbers in Professor Snape's spidery scrawl. Harry frowned, but read on,

This is my phone number, if the Muggles become unbearable, ring me. This is to be used under extreme circumstances only. SS

There was a smaller envelope inside, this one contained photographs and another note.

"I was informed you recently received a collection of pictures of your parents. The oaf failed to ask me, so I am sending the enclosed for your album. SS

Harry removed the one on top, it was his mother. She was about Harry's age, dressed in a sundress, her long red hair flying behind her as she swung on a swing set in a Muggle play park. Harry smiled contentedly as he went through the rest. Most were just of Harry's mother, one had Aunt Petunia as well, the one Harry liked best was of Professor Snape and his mum a few years older than Harry now, sitting under a large oak tree on the edge of the Black Lake. This unexpected gift gave him the boost his spirits needed to face a summer with the Dursleys.
Harry's first summer back at the Dursley's.

Harry lay on his camp bed in Ron's attic room in the Weasley's home, the Burrow, staring at the ceiling thinking how strange the few last weeks had been. It had all started with the worst birthday in Harry's memory.

Uncle Vernon was to host a very important dinner party at the house that night. For Harry, this meant spending the entire day straightening up the yard and garden, followed by hiding in his room as if he didn't exist. None of that was out of the norm for the eleven years with living with his aunt and uncle. What was different, was an unexpected and unwanted visitor to Harry's room during Uncle Vernon's fancy dinner.

When Harry returned to his room after his dinner, waiting for him was a strange little creature wearing a dirty pillowcase. It had large pointed ears and eyes as large and as green as tennis balls. It called himself, Dobby. He was there to warn Harry he could not return to Hogwarts in the fall.

Harry was a very confused by the statement. Why couldn't he go back to Hogwarts? Dobby couldn't tell him. What Dobby did say was that it wouldn't be safe for Harry. When Harry protested that he had to return Dobby did his best to make sure Harry didn't have a choice.

Dobby snuck downstairs and used a Hover Charm to smash Aunt Petunia's elaborate pudding on the head of one of the guest's head. If that wasn't bad enough, an owl from the Ministry of Magic arrived a few minutes later. It warned Harry he wasn't allowed to use magic outside of school, and never in front of Muggles. Uncle Vernon's guests left in an outrage, scream about it being a madhouse. Uncle Vernon was furious for the loss of his deal. He locked Harry in his room, installed a cat flap in the door for delivering food and installed heavy bars on the windows.

Harry wasn't able to send a plea for help because Uncle Vernon placed a padlock on Hedwig's cage. Harry wand, school books, and everything else in his trunk was locked away in his old room, the cupboard under the stairs. Even if he could ask for help Harry wasn't sure anyone would come. Harry hadn't gotten a single card or letter from his friends.

Harry wished he could call Professor Snape, the Potions Master at Hogwarts. Professor Snape might be snarky and gruff, but the man had protected Harry's life more than once during the previous school year. He also gave Harry his phone number and said to call if things were bad. But Harry was trapped in his room locked away from the nearest phone in the kitchen.

As it turned out, Harry didn't have to call. The morning after the incident another owl arrived for him. This one from the professor chastising him for his reckless behavior. He also asked why Harry had done it and how things were going. Unfortunately, it dropped its letter as Aunt Petunia was letting Harry out to use the bathroom. Uncle Vernon sent the owl off before Harry had a chance to respond. When the owl returned without a response and Harry's own bird didn't show up in the next day, Professor Snape came to check in person.
Aunt Petunia was even more upset with the Potions Master's appearance than Uncle Vernon was at losing his deal. Professor Snape made quick work of the lock on Harry’s bedroom door. He even vanished the bars on the windows.

"Pack your bags, Potter." Professor Snape ordered as the door banged open.

"My stuff is under the stairs," Harry informed him, hopping off the bed to comply.

Harry grabbed Hedwig and the professor issued him out of the room to show him where his things were being stored. The lock on the door was handled with a simple flick of his wand, he removed the luggage from the small space.

Professor Snape turned to a screaming Aunt Petunia, he ignored her insults and threats. Another wave of his wand cut her off mid-rant. "I have had to come and collect this boy two years in a row. Hope I have no need to do it again."

Harry followed the man out of the house, no words of farewell exchanged. When they got to the end of the block the professor stopped, setting down the trunk he carried. The professor shrunk Harry's trunk and placed it in his pocket. He then banished the lock on Hedwig's cage and undid the lock releasing the owl into the open air, the first time she'd been free since they returned to Privet Drive. She landed on the man's shoulder to nip his ear affectionately. She did the same to Harry before flying off.

Harry watched her until she was out of sight. His heart sinking slightly.

"Don't worry, Potter. You will see her soon enough. I am sure she could use the time to stretch her wings. Besides, she would not care for this part of the journey," Professor Snape explained.

"Sir?" Harry asked.

The man placed a hand on the back of his neck like the first time he collected Harry. They were not in London like last time but by a river bank, the outline of a large mill in the distance.

"I've been here before," Harry said looking around further.

The man stopped in his tracks. He cocked a curious eyebrow, "When?"

"Last year," Harry shrugged, "when we running away from all those letters."

"Idiot," the man grumbled.

"What'd I do?" Harry asked confused.

"Not you, Potter. Hagrid the dolt, he could have accomplished his task without any of the dramatics. Still, I am surprised you came here. Petunia wanted nothing to do with the village when we were growing up. She left as soon as she passed her GCEs and never looked back."

Harry wasn't too surprised to hear this. Aunt Petunia never talked about her family or where she grew up. The professor was walking again. Harry jogged to keep up.

"We need to have a talk about your little incident with the Hover Charm. Then, I will deliver you to
your delinquent friends." The man said as he turned and walked up a garden path.

The professor unlocked the door with a key. Harry was slightly surprised he didn't use magic. Harry waited to enter until the man waved him in. He was directed to take a seat in an old fashioned chair. The first thing Harry noticed was how the room was lined with books. Every inch of wall was covered by overflowing bookcases. The only space that was not buried under tomes of some sort, was the mantle above a stone fireplace across from where Harry sat. Harry could see one tarnished silver frame standing there, but was too nervous to investigate what it may contain.

The professor returned several minutes later a tea tray in hand. Harry noted there weren't any biscuits.

"Sugar?"

Harry shook his head before taking the offered cup.

"Now, would you care to explain why you used a Hover Charm in front of Muggles before ringing me, Potter?" The man said sitting back with his own tea.

"I didn't," Harry protested.

"The Ministry of Magic would disagree."

"It wasn't me. It was a house elf." Harry insisted.

"And what would a house elf want with you, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "He said it wasn't safe for me to go back to Hogwarts. I said I had to go back. He must have known we're not allowed to do magic outside of school because he used a Hover Charm on that pudding right after that."

"And why is it unsafe for you to return to school?"

"I don't know. He didn't say, just that his master was planning something bad." Harry sighed.

"Did the creature say who his master was?"

Harry shook his head, "He kept trying to punish himself when he said anything bad about them. They didn't sound very nice, though. He said his owners are always making him punish himself. His fingers were all bandaged because he had to burn them in the oven or something."

"I see," The professor sat back for a moment. He finished his tea slowly. Harry looked around the dark room as they drank their tea in silence.

"Come along, Potter," Snape said setting his cup on the side table.

Harry followed the man back out of the house. He didn't notice the glamour the man placed on the both of them as they walked to the end of the lane. There the man stuck out his wand hand, an instant later a purple triple-decker bus appeared in front of them. A pimply young man with large ears hopped off the bus.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus," the young man greeted.
Professor Snape cut him off before he could continue his speech. "Two to Ottery-St. Catchpole," he shoved Harry up the stairs with one hand and thrusting a fist-full of coins at the conductor.

There were only two other people on the bus. Harry was glad the trip wasn't going to be too long. The driver didn't seem to have that great of a handle on driving, as whole buildings had to jump out of their way.

Harry sat in one of the cushy chairs on the first deck watching the countryside fly by, jumping miles at a time. Professor Snape spent the trip hiding behind the morning's paper.

There were let off at the base of a large hill in the village of Ottery St.-Catchpole. Harry followed his professor up the hill and down the country lane. They stopped outside the garden gate of a tall, but slightly crooked house. The garden a mess, chickens wandering the yard. A man bent over the engine of an older blue car, his back to Harry and Professor Snape.

"Weasley," Snape said to get the man's attention.

Caught off-guard the man popped his head up but smashed into the bonnet. He rubbed the back of his head as he came back around the side of the car.

"Hello Severus," the man said.

"Weasley, here's Potter," the man said coolly.

The man extended a greasy hand to Harry, "Arthur Weasley."

"Hi," Harry said taking the man's hand.

The professor returned Harry's shrunken trunk and cage, "Potter, try not to cause any undue aggravation." The man said as a goodbye.

Harry nodded. The man didn't say another before disappearing with a spin on his heel. The sound of his disappearance making a loud crack.

Mr. Weasley chuckled as he opened the fence letting Harry into the garden. "Always was a bit of a cool one, Severus. I told him I could come and get you, but Dumbledore wanted him to do it for some reason. Come in the house."

Mr. Weasley placed a hand on Harry's shoulder as he led the boy into the cozy front room. A set of knitting needles were clicking together unaided on some project, a clock chimed in the corner.

"Oi, Harry," George greeted.

"You're here. Great. We'd let you kip in our room," Fred began.

George finished, "but there's no room, mate. You'll have to share with little Ronnie-kins."

Harry shrugged and followed the twins upstairs to put his things away. That was two weeks ago. They were going to Diagon Alley the morning to get their new books, robes, and things for the start of term. Harry rolled over and tried to get some sleep.
The next morning was rather chaotic, which was the standard course from what Harry had seen. Ginny, the youngest, and only Weasley girl had misplaced her shoes. Fred and George had slipped itching powder to Percy's under shorts. The older boy spent half an hour chasing the twins around the house in response.

Mr. And Mrs. Weasley finally gathered everyone together in the living room, the twins on the opposite side of the room from Percy. Mrs. Weasley passed around a flower pot full of glittery green-black powder. Everyone taking a pinch in turn, until Harry. He stared at it confused.

"Go on take some," Mr. Weasley encouraged.

Harry took the proffered pot and took a small amount of the glittering dust.

"I take it you haven't done this before?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry nodded.

"How did you get to Diagon Alley last year? Or to the house?" He asked curiously.

"We 'Appleated' to Diagon Alley last year and took the Knight Bus here," Harry answered.

"It's Apparate, mate," Ron corrected. "You don't want Miss. Know-It-All telling you, you're saying it wrong."

"No, 'cause it so much better from a spotted git like you, Ron," George remarked.

Ron and Hermione never got on very well. She was too serious for him. She didn't like the fact Ron goofed around all the time, but then expected help on his homework. Harry did his best to stay out of their bickering. He and Neville worked hard so Hermione didn't mind helping them when they had trouble.

"Why don't you go first Percy, show Harry how it's done," suggested Mrs. Weasley.

Percy stepped into the fireplace and threw down his powder. He clearly yelled, "Diagon Alley!" He was whisked away in a swirl of green flames.

"Now you," Mrs. Weasley told Harry.

Harry stepped in somewhat nervously. It wasn't hot, but pleasantly warm. Harry threw down his powder calling out, "Diagonally," as he coughed from the cloud of dust produced from throwing down the powder. Fireplace after fireplace rushed past Harry's eyes. He closed them fighting back the desire to be sick. He tumbled out of one after a few minutes, unsure of where he was.

Harry picked himself off the floor and looked around. It was a dark and dusty shop. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He needed to get out of here! Before he had a chance, the chime over the door rang. Harry didn't want somebody to see him so he stepped into a partly open wardrobe.

"Ahhhh, Mr. Malfoy, how can I help you today? We have some new," the old man behind the counter said his voice oily smooth.

"I'm not here to buy anything, Burke," Mr. Malfoy snapped. "I need to sell some things. The
Ministry Muggle-lovers are carrying out raids again. I cannot afford to be caught with anything too... unsavory."

Harry saw Draco wander into his line of sight. Harry could hear Mr. Burke and Mr. Malfoy haggling over the price of several items before finally agreeing as Draco lazily strolled around the store occasionally reading out a description of artifacts.

"Come Draco," Mr. Malfoy said tapping his cane on the floor by the door.

"I thought you were getting me present," the boy whined.

"I don't know why I should. Barely managed to pass your classes, outdone by a Mudblood," Mr. Malfoy remarked.

"It's not my fault all the teachers love the stupid Mudblood," Draco whined, "And stupid Harry Potter with his stupid scar."

"Blood is mattering less and less these days. Good Pureblood name used to be all you needed." Mr. Burke remarked.

"Indeed," agreed Mr. Malfoy. "Come Draco, I will see you Tuesday, Burke."

The bell chimed again as they left, Mr. Burke disappeared into the back muttering about rudeness and not being the half of what Malfoy owned. Harry waited a few minutes before making a break for it.

The stores in this street were dark like the one he just left. He thought to look over his shoulder to see the name of where he just left and crashed into a wall.

Or he thought it was a wall, until it spoke, "Wha' yeh doin' here Harry?" Hagrid greeted.

"Got lost," Harry said looking up at the giant.

"Not a good place teh be," Hagrid told him. "Come on, let's get yeh back where yeh suppose' teh be."

Harry followed him down and around the corner that turned into Diagon Alley.

"Who yeh here with?" Hagrid asked.

"The Weasleys," Harry said running to keep up.

Harry wished he was taller, it stunk having to almost run to keep up with the adults. Hagrid continued down the cobbled street easily, Harry only had to stay close behind him to avoid fighting the crowd.

"We'll head teh Gringotts, see if we can spot any of them redheads."

Their search wasn't too difficult, the Weasley brood was standing at the top of the marble stairs into the bank. It was not a Weasley that noticed Harry first, but Hermione. She pulled away from her parents to run and give Harry a fierce hug.
"Why didn't you ever write back to me," she demanded, as she pulled away from him. She smacked Harry hard in the upper arm.

"I never got a letter," Harry said rubbing the sore muscle.

"I sent you two a week since the end of term," Hermione informed him.

"I got your one yesterday, but that was the first. It must have been that elf," Harry said his anger growing.

"What elf?" She said curiously.

Harry's explanation was interrupted when he and the Weasleys were called to go down to the vaults. Harry watched as Mrs. Weasley scraped every last coin from the bare vault before the cart stopped at his own nearly flowing one. He did his best to hide it from the prying eyes of the Weasleys. Harry hadn't asked for this wealth, but being here with them felt like he was rubbing it in their faces.

When they returned to the surface Hermione and Harry went off to look at robes, the apothecary, and stationery stores. Fred and George headed off with one of their other friends, Lee Jordan, a fellow Gryffindor and the commentator of the Hogwarts Quidditch matches. Percy disappeared without a word, Mr. Weasley took the Grangers for a pint in the Leaky Cauldron. He loved everything to do with Muggles and this was one of the first times he had a chance to speak to some about everyday things. Meanwhile, Ron accompanied his mother and sister to get all the things Ginny would need for her first year at Hogwarts. All were supposed to meet at Flourish and Blotts at midday for the book signing and then lunch.

It was while they wandered through the street and stores of Diagon Alley that Harry got to explain about the mad house elf, Dobby, his uncle locking him in his room, and Professor Snape rescuing him, again. They said hello to many of their fellow classmates as they shopped. They arrived with their purchases in hand five minutes before the signing was to begin.

The person who was holding the signing was a man named Gilderoy Lockhart. Harry didn't know anything about him, other than the twins said their mum fancied him and whoever was to be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had assigned every Lockhart book as one of the required texts. When Lockhart appeared a few moments later in flowing lavender robes perfect curls, and a huge white-toothed smile, Harry couldn't understand why Mr. Weasley or any other the other crowd of women around might fancy him. Even Hermione was fawning over him! At the signing Lockhart announced he was going to be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts.

Harry's dislike for the man increased when the man dragged him in front of the crowd to get their picture in the paper. When Draco Malfoy called Harry out for this the boys squabbled. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy tried to break it up but ended up in a fistfight of their own instead. It took Hagrid to pull the two men apart. All in all, it was a very memorable trip to Diagon Alley.

The next week was fairly relaxed. The mornings spent eating breakfast and working on homework, the afternoons playing Quidditch in the nearby orchard. Like any other summer, this one too sadly came to an end. Trunks were packed, owls caged, everyone crammed into the Weasleys' car.

The trip was slowed when Ginny forgot her diary, Ron failed to pack his cauldron. With all of the delays, they arrived at King's Cross only moments before the Hogwarts Express was supposed to leave. Percy, Mr. Weasley, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley all got through the barrier fine. Harry ran at the wall, he held his breath preparing to go through. Bam! It was a solid wall!
Harry banged on the wall. "What's going on?"

"I don't know mate," Fred said. He came to stand next to Harry. He had no better luck. It was closed.

"We've missed the train," George said looking up at the clock.

“What are we going to do?” Harry asked.

George shrugged, "Mum and Dad will come back for the car."

"That's that's the ticket, brother dear. We'll take the car," Fred answered.

"How will your mum and dad get home?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Apparate. They only bother with the Floo Powder 'cause of us kids," Fred said leading the trio out of the station.

Trunks were reloaded into the boot, Hedwig's cage in the backseat with Harry. George sat behind the steering wheel with practiced ease.

This might sound like a stupid question, Harry thought to himself as they pulled out of the car park, but he had to ask, "Do you know what roads to take?"

Fred and George laughed.

"Why drive when you can fly?" George asked.

Fred did something and then the car was lifting off the ground. His twin hit a button on the dash and the car disappeared.

"Can't have the Muggles spotting us," he explained.

"But doesn't your dad work so people can't charm Muggle things? " Harry asked stunned as the houses turned to the size of raisins, then just to black dots.

"Dad will tell you, a Muggle artifact, like the car, simply being charmed isn't enough. As long as nobody sees it, we should be OK," said Fred.

The boys entertained themselves for a while with the novelty of how they were going to arrive for the term. As the hours past, this became less exciting, especially as their stomachs started to growl. The sandwiches Mrs. Weasley sent them off with consumed hours before. The games of Exploding Snap lost their spark around the same time the Invisibility Booster went out. This was of course when they were below the cloud cover to ensure they stayed on track with the Hogwarts Express.

Harry hadn't been happier to see a single thing as he was at the outline of the castle as it appeared in the windscreen. There was a loud thump. They were losing altitude too.

"We're out of petrol," Fred said trying to steer the falling car.

"Watch out," George called out, but it was too late. They were in the tree.
"You OK?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," the twins replied together.

"Now how do we get down?" George wondered out loud.

Soon the concern was not just getting down, but getting out alive. The tree they landed in didn't like being disturbed. A heavy limb crashed onto the roof, another whipped through the window, cutting Harry's eyebrow. After several more violent smashing of limbs, the tree finally shook the car from its branches.

The boys sighed in relief only to be ejected from the car. Hedwig's cage popped open as it landed hard on the ground beside her owner. The owl gave a disgruntled hoot before flying off toward the castle.

"Come on, if we hurry we should be able to make the feast," Fred said dusting himself off.

Harry followed the twins to the side of the castle and through a stone tunnel. They passed through a large chamber to a back of a large mirror on the fourth floor. The three boys headed downstairs. Their dreams of a victorious arrival were quashed by a very angry Potions Master waiting for them at the bottom of the main staircase. He didn't say a word just pointed in the direction of the dungeons.

"Explain," the man demanded, slamming the heavy wooden door to his office.

"The barrier was closed," Harry burst out. "We missed the train and we didn't know what else to do."

"So you thought let's steal a car? Why not break the International Decree of Secrecy? " Professor Snape purposed. "You were seen by no less than five different Muggles. You haven an owl, Potter. Did it ever cross your minds to send a request for assistance? Did it never occur to use some other form of transit? You could have taken the Knight Bus. I know you are familiar with how to flag it down, Potter."

"Oi," George protested. "It wasn't Harry's idea. We were the ones who said we should take the car."

The potions master sighed, "Of that, I have no doubt. If you were in my house all of you would be packing your bags..."

"But they're not, Severus." Professor McGonagall snapped, the door to the office banging open.

"Misters Weasley, Harry," Dumbledore greeted the three students.

"Hello sir," they replied in unison.

"Gentlemen, I am afraid, the professor is right." The man's voice soft, but firm. "You have committed a serious breach of wizarding law. I am forced to warn you, if you break any more rules like this, I will be forced to expel you."

Harry swallowed nervously. His eyes drifted to Professor Snape standing in the corner, his arms crossed over his chest. This wasn't the end of it, he knew it.

"You'll all be serving detention," Professor McGonagall informed them. "You will not be joining the
feast. I am sure you will receive all the attention you deserve once you reach the Common Room."

The boys nodded. The professor flicked her wand a plate of sandwiches and pitcher of pumpkin juice appeared on Professor Snape's desk.

"You'll eat here and then go directly to the Tower," Professor McGonagall continued.

She and the headmaster headed out, "Are you coming, Severus?"

"In just a moment," he called back to her. "Potter, a word."

Harry stepped out into the hall with the man. He stared at his shoes, he didn't want the man to be angry with him.

"I'm not upset, I am disappointed." Professor Snape clarified. The man placed a finger under Harry's chin forcing it upward.

Harry's emerald green eyes met the onyx of the man's. The finger drifted from Harry's chin to the cut above his eye.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" The man asked gently rubbing the blood away from his brow.

Harry shook his head.

"Do you have any idea what happened today?"

Harry shook his head once more.

"Very well, go eat your dinner, Potter. I will see you tomorrow evening for detention," Professor Snape said dismissing the boy.

"Yes sir," Harry said shuffling back into the office.

Professor McGonagall was right. The three of them got more than enough attention when they returned to the Tower. It was better than what happened the next morning.
Harry's walk down to the Great Hall was indeed filled with claps on the back and handshakes for their daring stunt. Everyone seemed to want to know how they did it, whose idea it was. Harry didn't really think about not like that. He wished people would stop congratulating him and the twins, they were just trying to get to school. If anything, Harry still wanted to know why the barrier was closed in the first place.

Harry's desire to move on only got stronger when Mrs. Weasley sent Fred and George a Howler at breakfast. The red card screamed their mother's displeasure ten times louder than she could in person. It wasn't the first time they had received one of there from their mother, but news their father was under investigation at work did diminish their spirits.

This was the first time Harry had seen either of the Weasley twins shy away from attention, the two stared at the ashes of the Howler. They put their heads together whispering before disappearing out of the hall. Ginny too was hiding, her mother had tacked on congratulations at the end of her tirade. It seemed the first year girl didn't want the whole school's attention. Harry knew how that felt, most of his first-year people wanting to talk to him, just because he was the famous Harry Potter.

Harry collected his class schedule from Professor McGonagall and headed off for his first class, Potions, of course. Class went surprisingly smoothly, Harry only had to listen to Draco's comments about the flying car and Mr. Weasley for five minutes before he was able to set up his supplies on the other side of the room, partnering with Neville. The professor reminded him of his detention that evening, with a sneer and an arched eyebrow. Transfiguration too went perfectly fine, not a single thing of interest. Defense Against the Dark Arts, on the other hand, was a complete disaster.

The class started with Lockhart giving a pop quiz on his books, the required texts for the class, all seven of them. However, the material in question wasn't about how he defeated any of the dark creatures, or what spell to use in certain situations. No, instead he asked about his favorite color, secret ambition. Harry looked at Neville who shrugged and went back to his own quiz. After the quiz that only Hermione passed the man released a cage full of Cornish Pixies, which he couldn't control. It was left to Harry, Neville, and Hermione to put them back in their cage.

Harry was glad when dinner arrived, even if he had detention right after. He slipped into his seat by George. The twins seemed to have gotten over much of their embarrassment from the morning and were back to their joking selves. That was until Professor McGonagall found them to inform them of their detentions. The twins would be serving theirs with Fitch, cleaning the trophy room with no magic, on Saturday. Harry, on the other hand, would serve his with Lockhart the same evening.

"Can't I do it with anybody else?" Harry pleaded.

"The professor requested you specifically Potter," she told him with a disapproving sniff.

"Are you sure I can't just do extra with Professor Snape," Harry offered.

The woman raised an eyebrow, "It's a punishment, Potter. You don't get a say in who it is with. How would it look if I gave you your pick of the staff?"

"That he's a right nutter if he's picking Snape," Fred commented.
Harry didn't miss the way the deputy headmistress's lips quirked up at the corners at his remark. Still, she said, "Seven o'clock Saturday, Professor Lockhart's office."

"Yes ma'am," Harry sighed. He gathered his things and made his way down to Professor Snape's office.

"Come in Potter," he called after Harry's light tap.

"Hi," Harry said standing before the man's sturdy wooden desk.

"Good evening," the man greeted. He stood and walked back into the classroom, Harry following behind him.

Harry took a seat when the man gestured. The man returned a moment later a roll of parchment in his hand. Harry cocked his head to the side.

"You will spend the evening writing me an essay detailing all of the mistakes you made yesterday when you and the Weasleys decided to steal their father's car. You are to include the possible ramifications of your actions for yourself and those you accompanied. Do not forget to include what impact this might have on Mr. Weasley's career," professor Snape explained.

Harry took the parchment. "Can I use a quill? I thought I'd be scrubbing cauldrons or something."

"You may," the professor said emphasizing the word. He handed the boy a summoned quill and an ink well.

Harry put his head down and began to write. He worked diligently for about thirty minutes.

"Done already, Potter?" Professor Snape asked looking up from his ingredients.

Harry shook his head, "Thinking." His gaze drifted off to the corner. He ran the quill under his chin before dipping it in the ink well and scratching away. He worked quietly for the next hour and a half until he felt a hand on his shoulder. Harry jolted under the touch, splattering ink all over his essay.

"I apologize." The professor said taking back his hand. "I did not mean to startle you."

"It's OK," Harry said setting his quill down. "Did I do something wrong?"

Snape's eyebrow rose curiously. The man quickly moved his wand over the ink that was starting to sink into the parchment, obscuring Harry's words.

"Right now," Harry clarified, watching fascinated as ink vanished.

"No," Professor Snape reassured, "However, it is late. You need to return to Gryffindor Tower now to ensure you are not out past curfew."

"OK," Harry said standing up and stretching.

"Have you completed your assignment?"

Harry shook his head, "Not yet. Sorry."
"There is no need to apologize. It shows you are taking it seriously. I expect it on my desk Monday."

Harry nodded. He rolled up the parchment to take with him. "Sir," he asked nervously.

"What is it, Potter?"

"I'm supposed to have detention with Lockhart on Saturday," Harry began.

"I am not excusing you from detention." The professor corrected sharply.

Harry shook his head, "I'm not asking you to..."

An eyebrow went up again, the man waiting patiently for Harry to speak.

"I just don't want to do it with him," Harry whined.

"Then we should be glad you weren't asked to express a preference," Professor Snape said coolly. "I am aware you already discussed this with your Head of House. You will do what Lockhart assigns you on Saturday, Potter."

Harry sighed, "Yes Sir."

"If you keep that up I will make sure he oversees them all."

Harry straightened up.

"Have a good evening, Potter." Professor Snape said dismissing the boy.

Harry grabbed his parchment and headed back to Gryffindor Tower. He was distracted when he heard what sounded like a whisper, but there was nobody around. Harry forgot about it by the time he got back to the Common Room.

The rest of the week went by fairly quickly. Oliver Wood found Harry to inform him the first Quidditch practice of the year would be Sunday since Harry and the twins were in detention on Saturday. Oliver wanted to win the Cup this year after coming so close the year before. They should have won last year, but Harry missed the game while recovering from his encounter with Voldemort.

Harry's detention with Lockhart was the worst he sat through, including three hours gutting frogs for Professor Snape. Harry spent almost four hours addressing the return envelopes to the professor's fan mail, while the man rambled about the price of being famous. He kept trying to give Harry about what Harry should and shouldn't do with his fame.

It was late in that third hour that Harry heard that voice again.

"So hungry," the voice whispered.

"What was that?" Harry demanded.

"What was what?" Lockhart said looking up concerned.

"That voice," Harry stood on his chair trying to locate the source.
Lockhart looked at Harry nervously, "Look at the time. No wonder you're tired. We've been here nearly four hours. Let's call it a night."

Harry grabbed his bag and headed off trying to find the source. It disappeared around the second floor. He told Hermione and Neville about it this time. Neither of them had heard anything unusual. Harry missed the scared look of concern, that passed between his friends. But when Harry hadn't heard it again, nor commented on it for several weeks they let it go.

Instead, they focused on classes, and for Harry, Quidditch. Malfoy was named Seeker for the Slytherins, not based on talent, but his father buying the whole team new Nimbus 2001s. It didn't matter, Harry knew they would beat them when the time came.

Quidditch wasn't the only thing Harry was looking forward to, Nearly-Headless Nick, the Gryffindor house ghost had invited Harry, Hermione, and Neville to his five hundredth Death Day celebration. Harry had never been to a Death Day party before. Hermione didn't think many living people had been, they were normally attended by ghosts and those sorts of creatures. It would make Halloween memorable.

As it turned out, the day was more memorable than anybody would like to admit. The Death Day party wasn't very fun. The dungeon where it was was cold and damp, all of the food was rotten. The band playing saws gave Harry a headache. The trio was heading up to the Great Hall to join the feast when Harry heard the voice again.

Harry ran up the stairs following it, Neville, and Hermione right behind him. Again, Harry lost track of it on the first floor, just outside of the girls' lavatory. That wasn't the only thing they found, but a seemingly dead Mrs. Norris hung on the wall, writing below her in blood, "The Chamber of Secrets is Open. Enemies of the Heir Beware."

"Let's go," Neville begged.

Before they had a chance, they were found by students heading back to their common rooms, the feast was over. Their attention was drawn to where Harry and his friends stood in a large puddle of water, in front of the bloody message.

"Enemies of the heir beware," a drawling voice read out loud. It was Malfoy, wonderful. "Better watch out Mudbloods."

"My cat," Filch moaned seeing Mrs. Norris hanging. He turned to Harry, "You've killed her."

"Who was here first?" Professor McGonagall demanded of the crowd.

Many in the crowd shrugged. Hermione stepped forward, "We were."

"Of course," the woman muttered.

"Can you explain, Miss Granger?" Professor Dumbledore asked softly.

"We went to Sir Nicholas' Death Day party," Neville began.

"We were coming back to join the feast," Harry continued.

"But we thought it would be over so we're going to see if we could get something from the kitchens."

We know we're not supposed to, but all the food at the Death Day Party was spoiled. On our way, we stumbled on this.” Hermione finished.

Harry looked at his friend puzzled, but she shook him off.

"He's killed my cat," Filch whimpered once more.

Professor Dumbledore came closer to inspect the writing on the wall and Mrs. Norris. "She isn't dead," he said after several minutes and waving his wand over her frozen form.

Filch looked up shocked.

"Too bad I wasn't here," Lockhart said popping up behind the headmaster. "I know just the counter curse."

Harry didn't miss Professor Snape rolling his eyes at the remark.

Professor Dumbledore ignored the comment, instead, he comforted the caretaker. "Professor Sprout is growing a batch of mandrakes. When they come of age will be able to revive Mrs. Norris."Turning to the students he said, "Now, everyone off to bed."

The crowd started to shift off toward their dormitories.

"You three, stay," Professor McGonagall requested.

Nobody had to ask what three she meant. They stopped waiting patiently for the professor's next inquiry.

"Is there anything you would care to add to your earlier explanation?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

They all shook their heads. Harry made sure not to look at him or the Potions Master. Both seemed to have the ability to know what he was thinking.

"Very well," the headmaster said dismissing them.

"Granger," Snape called after them.

Hermione stopped Professor Snape didn't ever hold her back. If he did that for anyone, it was alway Harry.

"You should know for the future Granger, that the kitchens are located in the basement."

Hermione nodded, "Yes sir. Thank you."

The three didn't speak until they were half way back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Why didn't you tell him the truth?" Harry asked.

"We were hungry, we would have gone to the feast if you hadn't gone running off." Neville pointed out.

"Harry, even in the wizarding world hearing voices nobody else can isn't good," Hermione said
hopping the trick stair.

"She's right," Neville agreed. His own jump was less successful, catching one foot causing him to lose his balance.

Harry and Hermione helped him back to his feet. This was the first time Harry was really worried about the voice. He wondered if it had anything to do with painting on the wall. Could this be what Dobby's warning was about? Who was the heir anyway? Harry shared these concerns with his friends.

Hermione was able to at least answer one of those questions. She told them of the legend of Salazar Slytherin, one of the four original founders of Hogwarts. He, unlike his fellow founders, didn't approve of teachings Muggle-Borns. He wanted to keep magic only in Pure Blood families. Before he left the castle for the last time, he released a monster in his secret chamber. Hermione couldn't find anything in all of her reading to prove that it existed. The professors refused to give any credit to the legend. Professor Snape threatened to take points from anyone who mentioned it in class. Without the heir of Slytherin and the chamber discussion in Potions turned back to the upcoming Quidditch match.

Harry crawled out of bed before any of his roommates were awake. He collected his Quidditch robes and headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast. He was joined shortly after by Chasers, Katie Bell, and Angelina Johnson. Wood came sat with them as he brought the still half asleep Weasley twins with him. Wood spent the meal going over strategy, encouraging his players to eat, meanwhile touching nothing himself.

As the crowd began to fill with the breakfast he moved the team down to the pitch. He paced and lectured for another half hour before George reminded him they still needed to change into their uniforms. Wood broke the meeting for ten minutes to let them change before calling them all back.

The bell rang in the changing room to announce it was time for the game to start. The team walked onto the field, paralleled on the opposite side of the pitch by the Slytherins. Wood and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin captain exchanged bone-crushing handshakes. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and they were off.

Harry flew straight up casting his gaze around for the tiny gold ball. Draco traced his movements. Harry ignored the blonde flying ten feet below him. He dodged a black bludger came zooming at him. It changed course and again went after Harry. He flew out of its way once again. It went to attack him again.

Harry could hear Lee's commentary on the ball's unusual behavior at this point. Fred and George came to fly on either side of their Seeker. No matter how hard they hit it, the bludger came right back.

The twin's protection made it impossible for any of them to play properly. Harry waved the twins off after awhile. The only way the ball would leave him alone is the game came to an end. He needed to catch the Snitch to do that. He didn't know the score, it didn't matter he just wanted the match to end.

Harry flew in complex zig and zags trying to look for the Snitch and avoid the obsessed ball. He as it. He just needed to make Malfoy he was still trying to avoid the bludger. He soared downward his eyes fixed on the ball.

Draco saw it too. He laid down on his broom urging it to go faster. He was twenty away... ten feet
away.... Harry put out one hand to grab it

Smash! The bludger crashed into the arm!

Harry screamed in pain.

Five feet...

Harry raised his good arm leaned out and snatched the tiny winged ball. He landed his broom blinded by the pain.

Hermione and Neville were on the ground waiting for him. The bludger came after him again. Hermione flicked her wand and it exploded. Harry tipped over he was going to be sick. He needed to get to the hospital wing.

"I can help," a swishy voice said above Harry.

"No," Harry groaned.

"Doesn't know what he's saying," dismissed Lockhart.

"No," Harry said trying to shove the man away.

Lockhart waved his wand and muttered a spell Harry couldn't hear. Harry's arm didn't hurt anymore. It felt like it was no longer there.

"The bones are gone," Neville observed.

Harry looked down at his now boneless arm, then promptly fell back, the world going back. He woke up in the Hospital Wing, a scowling Potions Master standing over his cot.

"Couldn't wait to have the matron look at your arm, Potter?" Professor Snape said picking up Harry's limp arm.

"It's not my fault," Harry complained. "Lockhart tried to fix it."

"This is what you get when you ask those to do something beyond their capabilities."

"I didn't ask," Harry protested, "He just did it. Can you fix it?"

"Madam Pomfrey will see to your care. I was here to provide her with a fresh batch of Skele-Grow. It will not be a pleasant process regrowing your bones, Potter."

"Great," Harry grumbled lying back down.

"Indeed," agreed the potions master.

"If you were at the match, how come you didn't come and fit it? Or least stop that mad bludger?" Harry demanded.

"I will let that go as you are in pain, but you would do well to remember I am still a professor, Potter," Snape said softly. "It is not my place as a spectator to interfere with malfunctioning. That is
the responsibility of the referee."

"You would have if it was Malfoy," Harry accused.

Madam Pomfrey appeared a moment later shoo-ing Snape out of the room before he had a chance to respond. Harry held his arm in place as she secured the boneless mass to his chest. She gave him a foul tasting potion Harry lay back and fell back to sleep.

Many hours later, Harry woke up to the sound of crying. It was Dobby! The creature explained it was he who charmed the bludger. He only wanted Harry to go back home. The same was true of the train, if he was expelled, Harry could not be hurt at Hogwarts.

It was a good thing he didn't have the use of both of his arms. Otherwise, Harry would have strangled Dobby to death. The house elf disappeared with a snap of his fingers when Harry tried to grab him.

Harry hadn't gotten back to sleep when there was a commotion at the other end of the ward. Harry strained to hear what the professors were saying.

"Petrified," Professor McGonagall said heavily.

"What was he doing out," Madam Pomfrey asked.

"Coming to see Potter, I expect. Maybe he caught a picture of what did this."

Picture? A camera? It had to be Colin Creevy. The boy had his camera with him wherever he went. He was obsessed with Harry too! He was always trying to take Harry's picture.

What attacked Colin they wouldn't know. When the professor tried to remove the film, it went up in smoke. Who could be doing this? Who was the heir? They needed to find out and soon, Harry's best friend was a Muggle Born.

Harry told Hermione and Neville the next morning about all he had seen in the Hospital Wing the night before. Hermione was trying to find out more about Slytherin's monster and the Chamber of Secrets, but other than the small mention in Hogwarts a History, she couldn't find anything.

The hunt for the heir only became more pressing after the first and only meeting of the Dueling Club.

“Good evening,” Lockhart said greeting the crowd as removed his lilac cloak, throwing it out to the gathered students. A fourth year Ravenclaw girl and her friends giggled when she caught it.

“Good evening,” the students replied a mixed level of enthusiasm.

“Can everybody see me? Can everybody hear me?” Lockhart asked, not bothering to wait for a reply. “In light of the recent happenings, the headmaster has allowed me to organize this dueling club. The desire of this club is to provide each of you a basic ability to defend yourself. I have kindly asked and luckily he graciously accepted, Professor Snape to assist me with this task. Don’t worry everybody, you’ll still have a Potions Master when I’m done.”

Like many of his fellow students, Harry was looking forward to the possibility attending a Dueling Club. There was a great deal of speculation as to who would be instructing, possibly Professor Flitwick he was supposedly a dueling champion in his youth. It was much Harry’s and most of the
boy’s disappointment that it turned out the main instructor turned out to be Lockhart. The fact he enlisted the aid of Professor Snape made up for it slightly. Harry wanted to see the Potions Master whip the floor with the poncy git.

“Yeah, but will you still be here,” Harry muttered.

Neville chuckled uneasily. The boy didn’t exactly understand Harry’s relationship with the teacher. The man was often mean to Harry in front of others, but when Harry talked about him in private it was as if he was an entirely different person. Also, the man scared him, more than Gran even.

“We will start by taking our positions,” Lockhart said. The two men raised their wands in salute. Before Lockhart knew what hit him, he was flat on his back his wand in Professor Snape’s hand.

The Slytherins cheered the loudest, but the rest of the boys weren’t far behind them.

“Very good, Severus. A bit predictable, though. I could have blocked him if I wanted,” Lockhart reassured the crowd.

Harry scoffed and watched the Professor Snape raise a dubious eyebrow.

“Very well, let’s have a pair of students now,” Lockhart said, “Potter and Longbottom.”

“If it is Longbottom, you’ll be sending Potter back to his aunt in pieces. Might I suggest someone from my own house?”

Lockhart nodded.

“Malfoy,” the dark-haired professor snapped and gestured toward the stage.

The blonde boy scurried up to the stage. Harry was much more sedate in his approach. The boys glared at one another as they took their positions on the dais.

“You will salute your opponent and then on the count of three cast your Disarming Charm. You are to disarm your opponent only.” Lockhart instructed.

“Scared, Potter.” Malfoy goaded.

“You wish,” Harry said raising his wand to the fighting position.

“Three- Two-” Lockhart counted.

Harry didn’t hear what spell Malfoy used, but it felt like he was hit over the head with a frying pan. He fell to the ground dazed, but he got right back up and yelled, "Rictusempra!"

A silver light shot at Malfoy and hit him square in the chest. The blonde was knocked over and landed with much disgrace in front of his Head of House. The man rolled his eyes as he grabbed the boy by the collar and got him back to his feet, turning him to face Harry once more.

“He’s cheating,” Hermione complained.

“Shut up Mudblood!” Millicent Bulstrode yelled at Hermione.
“Tarantallegra!” Malfoy yelled back.

The spell hit Harry causing his legs to jerk uncontrollably as if in a sort of quickstep. Meanwhile, a fistfight broke out in the crowd. The students watching stepped away to give the fighters their space.

“Finite Incantatem!” Professor Snape growled causing Harry’s legs to stop moving. “Prefects break that lot apart.

“Serpensortia!” Malfoy yelled a great black snake appeared, slithering toward Harry, its fangs bared, ready to strike.

Professor Snape rounded on Malfoy a dark scowl across his face, he turned back to Harry, “Don’t worry, Potter. I’ll get rid of it.”

“I’ll do it,” Lockhart said jumping back up to the dais. He made an extravagant gesture with his wand with the aim to disappear the snake. Instead, it rose up into the air ten feet and landed back on the ground a few feet away from a Hufflepuff, Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Everyone froze. Everyone except for Harry. He stepped closer.

“Leave him alone,” Harry said to the snake.

The snake turned its head to Harry and then back to Justin.

“Stop,” Harry told it.

It stopped.

“Finite Incantatem!” Professor Snape said next to Harry. The snake vanished in a puff of smoke.

“What you playing at?” Justin demanded.

“What! I…” Harry tried to say.

“Come on we need to go,” Neville said pulling Harry away.

"Potter! Longbottom! Stay!” Ordered Snape.

Harry looked over his shoulder and stopped at the door to Great Hall. Neville shook his head wanting to go on. They stood there as the hall emptied the whole school abuzz with the theory Harry Potter was the Heir of Slytherin. Professor Lockhart had escorted a still squabbling injured Pansy Parkinson and Hermione to the Hospital Wing, leaving Harry and Neville alone in the vast room with the Potions Master.

“Why did you fail to mention you were a Parselmouth?” Snape asked his formal manner relaxing as he took a seat on the dais.

“A what?” Harry asked confused.

“A Parselmouth, you can talk to snakes.” Neville clarified.

“I didn’t know. I mean I sent a boa constrictor on my cousin at the zoo last year. Still, I bet a bunch
of people here can do that."

"No," Snape said firmly. "It is an extremely rare talent Salazar Slytherin possessed it. That is the reason my house bears the snake as its emblem. They only over Parslemouth I am aware of this century is the Dark Lord."

"Now, Everybody is going to think you’re related to him now that you sent that snake on Justin," Neville added.

"I didn’t. I told it to leave him alone.” Harry insisted, “You heard me.”

"Potter, you were not speaking English. You were speaking Parslemouth, the language of snakes, a series of hisses." Snape explained.

Harry shook his head. “How can I speak another language and not even know it?”

“Maybe you are related to Slytherin way-way back?” Neville suggested.

"Of that, I am not certain," Snape told him honestly, "but I doubt that you are related to Salazar Slytherin. No, Potter was the epidemy of an idiotic Gryffindor."

"What about your mum?" Neville asked.

"No," Snape said just as firmly as before, but then stopped.

Harry looked at the man, but when he didn't continue Harry spoke up. "No, she was a Muggle Born."

"There's no chance she was a squib?"

"No, Longbottom, Lily's family was all Muggle," Snape answered.

"What's a squib?" Harry asked taking a seat down the dais from the teacher.

"It is a person from a magical family that possess no magic themselves."

"My gran thought I was one for ages until I bounced down the garden path," Neville explained.

Harry nodded in understanding. "So if I'm not the heir, who is?"
"How are we going to find the heir?" Harry asked flopping down in as chair next to Neville. "We don't even know who it could be."

"Maybe we do," Hermione objected.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Who do we know that hates all Muggle-borns, their family uses dark magic, the whole family has been Slytherin for centuries?" Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. "Malfoy?"

"Gran said his dad was one of You-Know-Who's closest followers. He said he was Imperiused, but Gran doesn't believe it." Neville added.

"So what? We just go and ask him if he's the heir?" Harry remarked skeptically.

Hermione pulled a large text from her stack of books. She flipped it open to a marked page. She ran her finger down the page before she turned it back around to Harry.

"The Polyjuice Potion, which is a complex and time-consuming concoction, is best left to highly skilled witches and wizards. It enables the consumer to assume the physical appearance of another person, as long as they have first procured part of that individual's body to add to the brew (this may be anything - toenail clippings, dandruff or worse - but it is most usual to use hair)." Harry read. "So what you want us to change into who Crabbe and Goyle then?"

"Who else would he tell?" Hermione pointed out.

Harry looked at the text again. "It doesn't have the ingredients or anything. How do we make it?"

Hermione bit her lip. "The recipe isn't in here, we need a different book. It's in the Restricted Section. We need a teacher's note."

Harry sighed, "Great. Can you imagine me asking McGonagall... Or Snape."

"Lockhart," Neville suggested.

Both turned to look at the other boy.

Neville shrugged, "He'll sign pretty much everything."

Harry nodded. "That's great Neville. When do we start?"

"We need to ask Professor Lockhart first," Hermione said.

"Just tell him you want to do some extra research," Harry suggested.

"OK," Hermione said somewhat reluctantly.
"It has to be you, Hermione. You're his favorite. If he asks why you can just say you're trying to get ahead. If it's me or Neville he'll know something's up." Harry explained.

Hermione nodded but didn’t look happy about it.

The Defense professor signed the note for Hermione without a second thought. The librarian, Madam Pince was much more suspicious. She read it through half a dozen time and even waved her wand over to detect if it was forged. Only then did she disappear into the stacks of the Restricted Section to retrieve the needed text. Even when she returned, she didn't seem to want to give it to Hermione.

The boys followed their friend with her newly acquired text until she went into the girls' loo.

"Hermione," Harry hissed from the doorway.

"Come on," she said grabbing an arm of each of the boys.

"This is a girls' loo, Hermione," Neville whined. "My gran would kill me if she found out I was in here."

"Nobody comes in here," Hermione said sitting down on the floor.

"Why?" Harry asked, following suit.

"Moaning Myrtle," Hermione said as she flipped through the book.

"What's Moaning Myrtle?" Harry asked.

"I'm Moaning Myrtle," the ghost of a teenage girl with a lot of acne and horned rimmed glasses.

"Nobody wants to talk to Moaning, Moping Myrtle." She let out a shriek and dived down a toilet.

Hermione waited a moment, to make sure the ghost wasn't coming back. "She's always like that. It's hard to have a pee while she's sobbing away." She turned her attention back to the text. "This is the most complex potion I've ever seen. We're going to need some special ingredients, crushed horn of a bicorn, lacewing flies, boomslang skin."

"Those aren't in the student cupboard." Neville observed. "How are we going to get them?"

"I don't know. How long is going to take to make?" Harry asked.

"A month," Hermione said running a finger down the page.

"A month, all the Muggle-Borns will be petrified by then," Harry moaned.

"Do you have a better idea?" Hermione demanded.

Both boys shook their heads. They would start as soon as they got an extra cauldron. Neville had melted three last year, so his grandmother wasn't too surprised when he asked her to send another one. Hermione took care of all of the brewing. The only thing left to figure out was to get those ingredients. They needed to figure it out fast. Hermione needed to add them on a specific day, if not
they would have brewed for three weeks, all for a worthless potion.

"I'm sure Professor Snape must have some in his private stores," Hermione said picking at her breakfast.

“How are we supposed to find out if he does? It's not like he'll let us in there.” Harry groused. "What if we distracted him and we break into the cabinet? Neville could melt his cauldron again."

Neville shook his head. "I don't want to do that. Gran was really mad about having to buy me the cauldron we're using for the Polyjuice. Why don't we just owl order what we need?"

"We can do that?" Harry asked shocked.

"My gran does it all the time," Neville reassured.

"Really?"

Neville nodded.

"They might be expensive..." Hermione pointed out.

Harry shook his head, "I've got gold. If Snape caught us breaking into his potions cabinet he'd have me expelled and then murder me."

"OK," Hermione agreed.

Neville walked them through how to fill out the order form he had for one of the apothecaries and how to do have them directly draft the money from Harry's vault in Gringotts. They sent Hedwig off with their order right after lunch. It was only after they sent that Harry worried what the ingredients she brought back would look like. Would she come back carrying a vial in her talons and make Professor Snape come over and ask what they ordered? Harry breathed a sigh of relief when she came back the next morning, a small plain box attached to her leg.

Three days later they added the ingredients after lunch.

"How long do we have to wait?" Neville asked.

Hermione checked the instructions once more, "Only one week more than we can take it and change into our choice of Slytherin and find out what Malfoy released from the Chamber."

"How are we going to get bits of Slytherins?" Neville asked.

Harry frowned. That couldn't be too hard right? They just needed a hair from Crabbe, Goyle, and whoever Hermione planned to turn into.

"I got a hair off Millicent Bulstrode during Dueling Club." Hermione informed them, "and I have an idea how to get yours. It will also make sure that they don't come back and there are two Crabbes and Goyles."

She didn't tell them, what her plan was until the day they planned to do it.

Hermione gave Harry and Neville each a cake doused with a mild sleeping draft. It would knock
them out for several hours. Harry and Neville would make sure they ate them, hide them and steal their robes. The three of them would then go down to Slytherin Common Room and ask Malfoy about the Chamber.

The first part went off no problem. Crabbe and Goyle ate the cakes Harry and Neville left hovering outside just outside a broom closet. The boys were able to steal their robes and shoes too and met Hermione in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. She poured out a measure of potion into each of the glasses. Harry took his portion and added Crabbe's short bristly hair watching as it turned to a grey-brown sludge. Neville's didn't look any better, all lumpy and brown. It looked like a cup full of boogies.

Everyone retreated to their own stall. Harry led the countdown to three when everyone drank their cup of potion. Harry gagged on the taste of it.

The book didn't mention how painful the transformation would be. It didn't talk about how it would feel like his skin was boiling from underneath. It didn't mention how it would feel like his intestines were being tied in knots and that. It didn't mention he would want to be sick to his stomach. It didn't say what it would feel like to have his bones and muscles stretched to Crabbe size.

Harry came out a moment later dressed in Crabbe's borrowed robes. Everything was fuzzy until he took off his glasses. He stared at himself in the mirror, his hair was like Crabbe's. His nose was wide and flat like Crabbe's. It was very strange.

"Harry," Neville asked stepping out of the stall to Harry's right, but the voice was the rumbling growl of Goyle's. Neville's round face was replaced by that of the Goyle.


"No. You go," Hermione squeaked.

"Hermione," Neville rumbled.

"No, go! You're wasting time," Hermione insisted.

The boys shared a look before heading downstairs. Harry had managed to locate the Slytherin's Common Room the week before. The only problem they had was they didn't know the password. They got lucky when they ran into their target, Malfoy, on the way downstairs.

It didn't take long for them to find out that Malfoy wasn't the heir. He didn't know who the heir was either. He guessed that it was Harry. It was a lot harder for them to get out of the Slytherin Common Room then to get in. The boys ran back to the bathroom to tell Hermione everything they learned, but Hermione wouldn't come out of her stall.

"Hermione," Harry begged.

"Did I mention the potion is for human transformation?" Hermione asked.

"Are you OK?" Neville asked, his voice returned to normal, but much more nervous.

Hermione came out of the stall, her eyes yellow with vertical slits, face covered in black hair. A long tail was just visible behind her.
"Errr...." Harry hesitated.

"We should go to the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey will know what to do." Neville urged.

Madam Pomfrey knew what to do alright, and admitted Hermione right away. She put up curtains so any visitors didn't see her by accident. It would take several weeks to cure Hermione of the effects of the misbehaving potion.

Madam Pomfrey didn't ask any questions, but Professor Snape was nothing but questions. "What do you mean you can't tell me what happened to Granger, Potter?" He demanded when Harry tried not give anything away.

"I don't know," Harry insisted. "Madam Pomfrey said it was a bad potion."

"Polyjuice, yes. And you have no idea why she took that particular potion?"

"I don't even know what that is," Harry said trying not to look the man in the eye.

"Look at me," Professor Snape demanded.

Harry's emerald gaze met the potions master's fierce onyx eyes reluctantly. The man's stare bore into Harry. Harry was certain the man could read his thoughts. He was done for.

"Potter, do not lie to me. Why did Granger take that potion?" It was said barely above a whisper, but Harry had never been more scared of him.

Harry bite his lip.

"I'm waiting, Potter." Professor Snape hissed.

"W...she... wanted to ... trying to find out ...ask Malfoy if he was the Heir of Slytherin." Harry stumbled.

"You little idiots tried to brew Polyjuice to infiltrate another house's common room?"

Harry shrunk back.

The professor gave an exasperated sigh. "Get out, Potter."

Harry looked up shocked," Sir."

"Get out, Potter." He repeated, jabbing his finger at the door.

Harry scurried out of the room confused. He wasn't sure exactly how he wasn't in trouble. Or maybe he was, he just was going to find out how later. He was guessing the later, but he would have to wait and see.

On his way back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry nearly crashed into the solid form of Nearly Headless Nick and the Muggle-born Hufflepuff, who Lockhart set the snake on, Justin Finch-Fletchley. Professor McGonagall found him moments later with the frozen bodies.

Harry tried to explain why he was there and how they had been like that when he got there. Still, she
sent him to the headmaster's office. He waited nervously for the man to appear. He got a chance to try on the Sorting Hat once more. It again told him he would have done well in Slytherin, but stuck by his placement in Gryffindor. Harry's upset a the Hat was forgotten as Dumbledore’s large red and gold bird burst into flames just as the Headmaster entered the office.

It was only when the old man explained how Fawkes, his old friend, was a phoenix, and thus die and are reborn from the ashes. That was when Harry realized he wasn't in trouble for that too. There was a lot more to that bird than Harry expected. The birds have a beautiful song, their tears had healing powers, capable of carrying great amounts of weight. The most interesting thing to Harry was, that Fawkes was the Phoenix that provided the feathers that were the core of Harry and Voldemort's wands.

Dumbledore didn't think Harry froze Justin or any of the other victims. He did ask if there was anything else Harry wanted to tell him, but if he confessed to the Polyjuice incident he knew he'd be expelled. Besides, Professor Snape was going to punish him for that Harry was certain. It was only a matter of time.

He didn't have to wait too long. The professor sentenced both Harry and Neville to a week of cleaning with Flitch. Hermione was excused because she was still recovering in the Hospital Wing. Harry and Neville brought her copies of the assignments every day, had dinner then met Filch for their nightly assignments. One of the nights was cleaning the trophy room, polishing all of the awards. Neville had a hard time with it, not used to cleaning without magic. He spent almost an hour cleaning one special award to the school to the caretaker's rigorous standards. Another evening they had to clean Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. She flooded it again after somebody tried to flush a book through her. Harry had kept the journal that was mysteriously unaffected by the water.

Even with detention, Harry was still able to make it to Quidditch practice. Wood wanted everybody in top shape for their game against Hufflepuff. The rest of the team wasn't too worried. Harry caught the Snitch in their last match in under ten minutes. The day before the game Hermione was finally allowed to return to the dorms.

While she was still in the Hospital Wing she had spent a lot of her time trying to figure out who the heir of Slytherin could be and what they might have released from the Chamber. All they knew was that it petrified its victims. Hagrid complained about how something kept killing his roosters too, but Harry didn't think that was related. It seemed like they were getting nowhere.

Harry hated the new news about having to be back in the Common Room just after dinner. The only break he ever got was during Quidditch practices which were now under the careful supervision of at least one professor. The only benefit was he got more time to spend working on his homework. He was caught up or ahead in all of his classes.

Looking for something to do one evening Harry went through his trunk. Maybe he and Neville could have a game of chess? He pushed some things out of his way trying to locate his chessmen. It was then he found the diary from Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom once more. He picked up back up once more.

There were three letters embossed on the cover, “TMR”. Harry turned to the first page, the only thing written there was “Property of Tom Marvolo Riddle”. Harry flipped through the book, there didn’t seem to be anything written in it. From the date on the top of the page, he could tell it was fifty years old. Why would anyone want to throw away any empty diary from fifty years ago?

Harry took out his quill and tried writing, “My name is Harry Potter.” The words disappeared an
instant later. New words appeared a moment later, in a different hand.

_Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come to have my journal?_  

Someone tried to throw it down a toilet.  

_It is a good thing I preserved my memories in something more permanent than ink. I always knew that people would not want anyone to read this diary._  

Why?  

_I know things. Terrible things that were covered up at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry._  

That’s where I am. Terrible things are happening again. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?  

Yes.  

Can you tell me?  

No.

Harry sat back frustrated, but a moment later more words appeared.

_But I can show you._

Then Harry was falling, falling into the journal.

Harry stood in the main stairwell of the school. Upstairs he could see a tall good looking boy wearing Slytherin House robes. Harry followed the boy’s gaze down the stairs. Two teachers were carrying a stretcher away. One hand was just visible from under the sheet.

“What are you doing here, Tom?” A man asked.

Harry looked up shocked. He, who normally had long silver hair and a beard that went all the way down to his belt, now stood before, Harry hair was auburn and came down maybe to his shoulders, his beard mid-chest. Still, Harry knew that voice, even if the man looked very different today, there was no mistaking this was Albus Dumbledore.

“I heard rumors, sir. I wanted to see for myself.” The boy said coming to stand beside his professor.

“It’s true,” Dumbledore said sadly.

“They’ve said that if the killer isn’t caught they’ll shut the school down.”

“I’m afraid that’s also true.”

“I have nowhere to go,” Riddle said almost desperately. “What if the killer is caught?”
“What do you know, Tom?” Dumbledore demanded.

The boy marched off without another word. The scene jumped. They were now in a dark hallway. The great outline of a person stood before a cabinet.

“Hello, Hagrid,” Tom said to the boy. “Give me the creature. It’s killed a girl. It needs to be destroyed.”

“He didn’t kill nobody,” Hagrid shot back.

“Come now, Hagrid. Give it over,” Tom urged. “They’ll close the school if the killer isn’t caught.”

“It wasn’t Aragog.” Hagrid insisted.

“Move aside,” Tom demanded.

Hagrid didn’t move away. The lid opened slightly a leg barely visible.

“Move aside,” Tom repeated.

The lid opened a creature dashed away before Harry could get a good look at it. Then he was sitting back on his bed in the Gryffindor dormitory. He rushed downstairs to the tell Hermione and Neville what just happened. Both were much more suspect about what this Tom Riddle had to say. Neville remembered the name from having to polish his special award to school, that’s all they knew about him. Hermione wanted to go to the library to see if she could find out something more about him.

The morning of the Quidditch match Harry was running late. He missed breakfast trying to catch up on homework before the game. It was only when Neville came back from breakfast for his scarf that Harry realized how late he was. It didn't matter, though. The match was canceled when two more students were found petrified, a Ravenclaw prefect and Hermione.

Neither Harry nor Neville could explain what she was doing in the library or why she had a mirror in her hand. Everything changed at that point. Teachers had to escort students from class to class, everyone had to be back in their dorms an hour after dinner, and worst of all, all clubs and Quidditch were canceled.
Harry dragged out packing his supplies after potion on Friday.

"Why are you wasting my time, Potter?" Professor Snape said straightening up a stack of recently collected essays.

Harry pulled his bag over his shoulder. "How long will Hermione be petrified?"

The professor stopped and looked at the dejected boy. "Professor Sprouts says the mandrakes are coming along rather well. We must wait for them to finish maturing. Then I will chop them up, stew them and make the antidote."

"How long is that?"

"It will likely be several more weeks at least, if not a month or more."

"That long?"

"I cannot speed up the process, Harry. I am sorry." Snape said softly.

Harry turned his head to look at the man, the sound of his name catching him off guard. There was something in his expression Harry couldn't quite name. It wasn't sadness exactly. It was sort of like the one he had on the visit to Diagon Alley. But it wasn't exactly the same. It was softer, Harry shook his head. He couldn't figure out what that might mean.

"Now, go and get some lunch." The man said issuing the boy out of the dungeon.

"Where were you?" Neville asked when Harry sat down next to his friend.

"I needed to ask Snape something," Harry taking a chop from the platter in front of him.

"What did you need to ask the slimy git?" Fred asked.

"I wanted to know how much longer those people in the Hospital Wing will be petrified," Harry explained.

"Why not just ask Madam Pomfrey?" George asked.

"I haven't been able to get to the Hospital Wing with the new rules."

"Who walked with you from Potions?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged, "Snape."

"OK Harry," Seamus called to him.

Harry looked up, "What?"

"I don't who did it. You need come look," Seamus told him.
Confused Harry followed the boy back to their dorm. Everything was ripped out of his trunk. The only thing Harry could see was missing was Riddle's diary.

"I wanted to ask him if he knew any more about the Chamber of Secrets," Harry told Neville once they were alone.

"We could ask Hagrid," Neville pointed out. "It was his creature that killed the girl, right?"

"We'll go tonight." Harry agreed.

After dinner, Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak he had shoved into his bag. Neville and Harry carefully walked back upstairs to the mirror on the fifth floor. Harry led the way down the dark tunnel and out to the grounds. Back under the cloak they carefully walked to Hagrid's.

They could hear Fang, Hagrid's boarhound, whining inside. Neville banged on the door. There was loud shuffling and the door swung open to reveal the giant man holding a loaded crossbow.

"Who's there?" Hagrid demanded.

"It's us," Harry said pulling the cloak off of them.

"Of course it's yeh two," he grumbled stepping aside to let the boys in.

"Why do you have the crossbow?" Neville asked.

"I reckoned be somebody else payin' me a visit tonight." He said leaning against the wall.

"Who?" Harry asked taking a seat at the table.

"Never yeah mind 'bout that," Hagrid deflected. "Wha' yeh two doin' down here?"

Harry looked to Neville who encouraged him to go on.

"We wanted to know how you got expelled," Harry said.

Before he had a chance to answer there was another knock at the door. Harry and Neville got back under the cloak. They didn't need to get Hagrid in trouble for letting them visit.

"Good evening Hagrid," Dumbledore said at the door.

"Evenin' Headmaster," Hagrid said stepping aside.

Dumbledore was followed by a very strangely dressed man. He wore a pinstriped cloak over a three-piece suit and nervously twisted a lines green bowler hat in his hands. Harry recognized from the newspapers Hermione received at breakfast, it was the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

"Greetings Hagrid," the man said trying to sound jolly, but came off mostly nervous.

Hagrid grunted in response.

"Now Hagrid," Fudge said speaking more slowly than necessary. "We at the Ministry... In light of
recent events, we need to be seen as if we're doing something."

Hagrid looked to the headmaster for clarification.

"The Minister feels given your unjust record that it would be best if you were to leave the school," Dumbledore explained.

"That's not right," Hagrid complained. "I didn't do nuthin' wrong."

"I know," Dumbledore reassured.

There was another knock and all the attention turned back to the door. Another familiar and unpleasant face appeared when it was opened, Lucius Malfoy.

"Get out of me house, Malfoy," Hagrid growled.

The blonde cast a disapproving glare over the patchwork quilt to the huge copper kettle to the scrubbed oak table. "You call this a house?"

"What yeh want, Malfoy?" Hagrid demanded.

"I was looking for the Headmaster. I was informed he could be found here." Lucius said with a sneer.

"And how can I be of assistance?"

"I come bearing an order for your removal. It's signed by all twelve members of the board of directors." Lucius said pulling a piece of parchment from his coat pocket.

"Yeh can't take Dumbledore," Hagrid warned. "They'll be an attack a day. Killin's next."

Lucius turned and raised a curious eyebrow. "How can you be so sure?"

"Come Hagrid we must be going?" The Minister insisted.

"Goin' where?"

"It's only for a short time. Only this is all put to rights," Fudge dodged the question.

"I'm not goin' to Azkaban," Hagrid pleaded.

"Only for a little while," Fudge failed to be reassuring.

"Headmaster?"

"He has no power anymore, oaf," Lucius said darkly.

"If anybody wanted to know what's goin' on they jus' need ta follow the spiders." Hagrid said, "An' somebody will need to be lookin' after Fang."

"Of course," Dumbledore said followed Hagrid out of the cabin.
The minister was just behind the headmaster. Lucius glared around the room once more before he too left. Harry and Neville waited several minutes before they stepped out from under the Invisibility Cloak.

"What did he mean to follow the spiders?" Harry wondered.

"I don't know," Neville said shaking his head.

The boys made their way back to the castle. Over the next week or so Harry noticed the place that was normally crawling spiders there were suddenly none. One evening on the way back from making sure Fang had food and water after dinner Harry spotted a chain of spiders heading out of the front door.

"We need to follow them," Harry urged Neville.

"When? We aren't supposed to go anywhere without a teacher?" Neville pointed out.

Harry frowned. He would have to think about that one. The only time they were sort of allowed to move around the castle was the weekend.

"Saturday," Harry said. "We say were checking on Fang and follow the spiders then."

The plan went off better than Harry would have expected. They only ran across Professor Flitwick and somehow the old man bought their story. Especially surprising that it was already late afternoon. The boys spent a little while playing with the dog before it started getting dark. They drifted closer to the forest in case somebody was watching. They grabbed a couple of lanterns from Hagrid's cabin and headed in.

Finding the spiders wasn't as hard Harry expected. After Harry wished that it was much harder. The spiders lead them deep into the heart of the forest, the trees so thick no light came through the canopy.

Here they met Hagrid's pet, Aragog. The creature was a six foot tall, blind spider covered in thick black hairs. He explained that he was not the creature that killed the girl in a bathroom. It was something else, they refused to say its name.

That was fine. They could figure out what it was from there Harry was certain. No, the problem was Aragog wanted his family to eat Harry and Neville. If it hadn't been for the Weasley’s car coming to their rescue, they would have been.

Unfortunately, Neville also broke his wand in the escape. The case was cracked, the dragon heartstring damaged. They had a hard time explaining how that happened to their professors when they returned to class Monday morning. For the moment he was still using the wand, but with less success than normal. The wand would vibrate on occasion, Neville did his best not to cast any spells, much to the teaching staff’s relief.

The boys spent the next several weeks trying to determine what the creature could be.

"I wish Hermione was here," Harry groaned.

"You think Madam Pomfrey would let us visit her?" Neville suggested.
Harry shrugged, "We can try."

The boys were able to break off from the group that Lockhart was leading to Transfiguration.

"Potter, Longbottom," Professor Snape snapped as the two came around the corner. "Where are you supposed to be?"

Harry and Neville froze. "Where are you supposed to be?" He repeated.

"Uhhhh...We wanted to see Hermione," Harry said after a moment.

The man raised an eyebrow, "Look at me, Potter."

Harry turned up his chin firmly, he didn't hesitate to meet the man's steely onyx gaze. "We wanted to visit Hermione," he insisted.

"Miss Granger is still petrified and will be for several more hours." Professor Snape observed.

"Hours?" Neville asked.

"Hours, Longbottom," Professor Snape confirmed. "I just came from Professor Sprout's greenhouse to collect the mandrakes for preparation. The victims will be back with us in next twenty-four hours, possibly slightly longer."

"You said it would be weeks," Harry pointed out.

"I was mistaken. Not everyone can be perfect," Professor Snape remarked dryly.

"Sorry sir," Harry muttered.

"Go," the man said pushing Harry lightly behind the shoulder blades.

"Where are we going?" Neville asked.

"I believe you wished to visit Miss. Granger, Longbottom." He said pushing Harry a little further down the hall.

Madam Pomfrey was a bit surprised to see the boys. She didn't see the point visiting a petrified person, but let them stay.

"I wish you were here," Harry said sitting beside his friend.

"Harry, look at this," Neville said smoothing out a piece of paper.

"Where did you get that?" Harry asked leaning closer.

"It was in Hermione's hand. Listen:

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk
has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

"Then how come nobody has died?" Harry muttered. "They must not have looked it in the eye. Hermione had the mirror she was probably checking every corner when she figured it out. Justin... He must have seen him through Nearly Headless Nick. Nick can't die again. Colin saw him through his camera."

"What about Mrs. Norris?" Neville asked.

Harry thought back to that night. "There was water on the floor. And look, Hermione figured out how it was getting around." Harry said pointing to a word scrawled on the bottom of the page.

"Pipes," Neville read. "That explains why nobody has seen a huge snake slithering around the castle. We need to tell a professor."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

An announcement came over the speakers ordering all students back to their dormitories. Harry and Neville looked at one another. They needed to let a teacher know what they knew. Instead of going back to Gryffindor Tower, they headed for the teachers' lounge. Somehow they didn't run across anybody on their way down.

"What's happened?" They heard Professor Flitwick squeaked.

"The creature has taken a student. It means to kill her," Professor McGonagall told him.

"What are we to do?" Professor Sprout asked.

"Have the board of directors been contacted?" Professor Snape asked.

"I have have contacted the board of governors," she told him.

"What's going on," Lockhart said crashing into the room. "I just woke up."

"The beast has taken a student," Professor McGonagall explained.

"Who is it?" Professor Snape asked.

"Ginny Weasley. We need to ensure the students are safe. It's likely this is the end of Hogwarts. She turned to the newcomer, "Gilderoy, didn't you just say that you know where the entrance to the Chamber?"

"Well yes," Lockhart stammered.

"Yes, didn't you say that you know what the beast is and how to defeat it." Professor Snape continued.

"We'll leave it to you then shall we," Professor McGonagall said.

"Of course, I just need to prepare," Lockhart said rushing out of the room.
"Professor," Harry called after him.

The man spun around, "What Potter?"

"We know what's in the Chamber. I think I know where too," Harry said running to catch up with him.

"Really?" Lockhart asked stopping mid-step.

"Yes sir," Harry confirmed.

"I'll show them," Lockhart muttered. "Lead the way, Potter." He said more cheerily to the boys.

"You know where the Chamber is?" Neville whispered.

Harry whispered back, "I think so. We just need to ask her for certain."

"Ask who?" Demanded Lockhart.

They made their way downstairs to outside a familiar bathroom.

"In here?" Lockhart said in disbelief.

Neville too looked a bit confused. Harry pushed the door open. The others followed a little more warily.

"Who's there?" Myrtle said coming above her stall. "Oh it's you," she pouted spotting Harry and Neville. "You haven't come to see me since you finished that potion of yours."

"I know. I'm sorry." Harry said. "Myrtle, can I ask you a question?"

She nodded.

"Did you die here?"

She nodded again. "Just over there. A boy came in speaking a sort of funny made-up language. Then all I saw was a great yellow eye and I...I died."

Neville looked around the sink she had pointed to, he carefully inspected the taps. On the piping underneath, he found a small snake etched on one pipe. Harry came to look too.

"How do we open it?" Harry pondered out loud.

"Try saying something in Parslemouth?" Neville suggested.

"Open up," Harry tried.

Neville shook his head, "English."

Harry tried again, he didn't need Neville to tell him he'd been sure successful. With a great shaking and rumbling the sinks moved apart to reveal a long dark pipe.
"Expelliarmus," Lockhart yelled, the boys’ wands flew out of their hands.

They turned to look at their professor.

"Oh, that worked better than I expected. Now, down the tunnel boys."

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Come now," Lockhart said jabbing his wand at the boys.

Harry jumped down the tunnel first, Neville an instant later.

"Over here Neville," Harry said waving him over to the side.

"What's it like down there?" Lockhart called.

"Dark and wet," Neville called back.

Lockhart let out an excited squeal as he too came down. Neville and Harry tackled him knocking two of the wands out of the man's hand.

"That wasn't a very smart idea, boys. I was just going to leave you here. Now I'll have to wipe your memories too."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"I can't have you telling everyone you figured it all out. How would that affect my book sales? Outsmarted by a pair of ten-year-olds." Lockhart said rolling up his sleeves.

"We're thirteen," Harry corrected.

"Ten, thirteen, it won't matter in a minute. You won't even know who you are. Say goodbye to your memories, boys." He raised the wand in his hand he must not have noticed it wasn't his own until it was too late. "Obliterate!" Lockhart yelled a flash of white light was blinding.

Harry didn't feel any different. He looked to his friend who shrugged. The boys carefully approached the professor now laying a few feet away. Harry grabbed the wand in the man's limp grip.

"Sir," Neville said cautiously, his own wand raised ready to defend himself. "Is he alive?"

Harry leaned closer, placing a hand on the man's chest. "He's breathing. You need to stay with him. I'm going to look for Ginny. Stay here and keep an eye on him. Try and call for help or something." He didn't wait for a response before he set off further into the Chamber.

Harry ran past a huge snake skin, it was as wide as an oak trunk and fifty feet long. Who knew how long it had been there. Harry didn't have any problem with speaking in Parselmouth this time when he came to the ornate doors to the antechamber. The door opened noiselessly when Harry commanded it open.

Torches lit magically as soon as Harry entered the room. A dark shape lay on the floor a splash of red fanning out at one end.
"Ginny!" Harry yelled running up to the small girl. He shook her gently. "Ginny, wake up."

"She won't wake. She's too far gone," Tom Riddle said appearing from behind a pillar.

"Tom, help me. She's cold." Harry urged.

"Why should I help you? As she fades I grow stronger." Tom said looking at the pale girl, a clear look of contempt on his face.

"I don't know what you mean. Help me! The creature could be back at any moment."

"The basilisk won't come until it's called."

Harry looked up horrified. "You're the Heir of Slytherin? You're the one hurting all those people?"

"Yes. You have no idea how much I wanted to meet you, Harry Potter. I was a friend to that stupid little girl. I listened as she whined about her brothers, about not having any friends at school. I pretended to care. She didn't know as she opened her soul to me that I grew stronger. I was able to take a hold of her, make her do things she didn't remember, all because of that diary." He motioned to the book that lay beside Ginny. "But she got scared and threw away. And who should find it, but you, Harry Potter. How could such an unremarkable babe defeat the great Lord Voldemort?"

"How can you know about Voldemort? He's after your time?"

"You think I would keep my filthy Muggle father's name after he abandoned me and my mother simply because she was a witch? I the last remaining heir of the greatest of the Hogwarts founders. No. I fashioned myself a new name." Tom waved his wand spelling out "Tom Marvolo Riddle," with another swish they moved to say "I am Lord Voldemort". "How did you defeat me, the greatest wizard to ever live?"

"You're not the greatest wizard to ever live. That's Albus Dumbledore!" Harry yelled defiantly.

Both of their attention was drawn to the great red and gold bird that announced itself with a musical trill. Fawkes dropped something at Harry's feet. It took him a moment to realize it was the Sorting Hat.

Tom scoffed. "This is what Dumbledore sends his great defender, an old hat, and a songbird? Those won't do you any good. Goodbye Harry Potter."

The older boy began to hiss. The basilisk slithered out from a pool of water beside the wizards. Harry slammed his eyes shut and ran, quickly darting off into one of the many giant pipes. Fawkes screech. Harry didn't know what was going on, but Tom was furious.

"Your bird may have blinded the basilisk, but it can still smell you," Tom told him.

Harry ran for his life. He turned down the first pipe he came to and then another one. He could hear it moving trying to find him. It was getting closer...

"Hello," Lockhart said coming around the corner to join Harry.

Harry put a finger to his lips.
"This a rather strange place isn't it?" Lockhart continued not bothered.

The basilisk appeared a second later drawn by the noise.

"What on earth is that?" Lockhart screeched. He never got to find out as the snake struck sinking its foot long fangs into the man before swallowing him whole. Harry held his horrified breath as he watched. The snake sniffed around once more Harry picked up a rock at his feet throwing it as far as he could the distant clattering drawing the snake away once more.

Harry ran back to the main chamber.

"How are you still alive?" Tom demanded.

Harry simply shrugged. As he ran back toward Ginny he noticed something glittering from within the Sorting Hat. As he picked it up to investigate, he was shocked by how much heavier it was than in Dumbledore’s office. Reaching within the hat he grabbed hold and pulled. The glittering was the gold and ruby encrusted hilt of a six-foot long sword.

Tom hissed again drawing the basilisk once more. Harry dodged one attack and the next. He clumsily tried to attack the beast, but it was no good. The creature’s scales were too hard, he scrambled up and away, thinking to get higher he might stab near its eyes. It moved to bite Harry and in desperation the boy drove the sword into its mouth and up, ignoring the pain of the fang piercing his forearm. The serpent screamed, thrashing about before it collapsed and dead.

Tom looked at the much younger boy, his face red with rage. "You may have killed the basilisk, but I can still kill you."

"No," Harry said stumbling toward the diary. He pulled the fang from his arm and drove it through the pages of the book.

Tom let out an inhuman scream. Harry opened the book and stabbed it into the remaining pages. The boy disappeared in a ball of flames. Harry smiled weakly.

"Harry? It was the diary where's Tom?" Ginny asked looking around the chamber.

"He's gone. Don't worry… You need to go find Neville. He's back at the entrance. Yell for help until somebody comes." Harry urged her.

"What about you?" She asked looking at his bleeding forearm.

Harry shook his head. He was starting to feel sick to his stomach. His eyelids were getting heavy too. Fawkes came back over the Sorting Hat in its talons once more.

"Thanks, Fawkes, but I don't think that will help me now," Harry said taking in the hat.

The bird ruffled its feathers indignantly. It then tilted its head over Harry's arm. A large wet tear dropped onto the boy's bloody skin. Harry hissed at the pain, the skin stretching back together.

"Harry?"

"I'm OK." He promised Ginny. "Their tears have healing properties." He whispered almost to
himself.

The bird cried one more tear on Harry's injured arm, he smiled at the bird, “Thanks, Fawkes.” It took a couple more moments before both felt well enough to try and find Neville. Harry made sure both had their wands, the sword, and Harry picked up the destroyed diary. It turned out, Neville was right where Harry left him.

Lockhart had been freighted when he woke up. He didn't know who he or Neville was and panicked. He knocked Neville over the head with a rock and tried to find a way out of the chamber.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Ginny finally asked.

Fawkes chirped and Harry instructed them to grab onto him. He grabbed a firm hold on the bird's tail and they were off, soaring back up the tunnel. Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Sprout, and Dumbledore were standing in Myrtle's bathroom waiting when they returned.

The students were guided directly to the headmaster's office. Harry and Neville did their best to explain exactly what happened, without admitting breaking too many rules. Harry didn't miss Snape's amused snort when Neville described Lockhart trying to destroy their memories only to have it backfire from Neville's broken wand. Professor McGonagall let out a sound of distress as Harry told them about Lockhart being eaten. There was a rather proud look on Dumbledore's face as Harry described recovering the sword from the Sorting Hat. The teachers were dismissed to let their houses know what happened after Harry told them he killed the basilisk. Professor McGonagall took Neville and Ginny up to the Hospital Wing on her way to the Tower. Harry was left alone to tell the headmaster about Tom Riddle being Voldemort and him only disappearing when Harry put the fang through in diary.

"You showed great bravery tonight, Harry. And you must have shown me great personal loyalty as well, to bring Fawkes to you." Dumbledore said stroking the phoenix's head.

"You... Voldemort," Harry corrected at the man's turned down expression. "He was saying he was the greatest sorcerer of all time. I told him he wasn't, you are."

"That's very touching, Harry." The man said dabbing at his eyes. "Thank you."

Harry watched as Dumbledore paced around the office. "Sir, how come I can talk to snakes? Do you think I'm related to Slytherin too? Was I put in the wrong house?"

"No, Harry. Look more closely at the sword," the man came to stand next to the boy. "Read here," he said pointing at a spot on the blade.

"Godric Gryffindor," Harry breathed.

"Only a true Gryffindor, in great need could have drawn that sword then." He clapped Harry on the shoulder, "You're in the right house, my boy. Always remember Harry, it is our choices that define us."

Harry smiled relief. The door to the office banged open to reveal Lucius Malfoy and behind him, cowering, the House Elf, Dobby.

"I heard you were back," Lucius said darkly.
“You,” Harry mouthed at the house elf.

The little creature tried to hide behind his master’s legs but was shoved away.

"Yes, the other governors summoned me when the girl was taken. It turns out several of them were under the impression they would be hurt if they did not agree with my removal.” Dumbledore explained lightly. "Now no need to worry, Lucius. The matter has been dealt with, the girl is back. Her parents will be here shortly, as will Mr. Longbottom’s grandmother."

Dobby gestured at the journal sitting on the desk then at Lucis. Harry watched Dobby repeat the gesture several times. Harry had an idea what Dobby was trying to tell him.

"Very well," Lucius conceded.

Dumbledore went on, "I believe the Board of Governors is calling a meeting tonight, about your continued position. I would not wish you to miss it."

"Come Dobby," Lucius said beating the house elf about the head. Lucius kicked him when we didn’t move fast enough.

Harry and Dumbledore watched the two leave in silence.

“Why doesn’t Dobby just leave?” Harry asked after a moment.

“He cannot. House-elves are bound to the house they serve for life, or until their master’s present them clothes.” Dumbledore explained.

A wicked grin spread across Harry’s face. “Can I have this?” He said picking up Riddle’s diary.

Dumbledore nodded with a bemused look on his face. Harry dashed out of the room trying to catch up with the man and his house elf.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Harry called from the top of the stairs.

The man stopped and waited for Harry to stand by him.

“What do you want, Potter?” He snapped.

“I wanted to give this back to you. I know you snuck it into Ginny Weasley’s cauldron at the bookstore last summer.” Harry said handing the man Riddle’s ruined diary.

Lucius placed the head of his cane under Harry’s chin. “Be careful, Potter. Or you’ll go the way of your parents.”

Harry grinned. Lucius stormed off, handing Dobby the book. He hit him over the head for not moving. Harry gestured for him to open it, Dobby did so. Inside tucked between the pages was a wet, bloody sock.

“Come Dobby,” Lucius ordered.

“No. Master has given Dobby a sock. Dobby is a free elf.” Dobby whispered.
“What?” Lucius demanded.

“Master has given Dobby a sock,” the house elf said more loudly. “Dobby is a free elf!” The little creature said raising the dirt bit of fabric.

“You cost me, my servant!” Lucius said drawing his wand from his cane, as he whirled on Harry.

Dobby stepped between Harry and the furious wizard. The man crashed and was flung back by a barrier the elf created. “You will not harm Harry Potter.”

Lucius struggled to his feet, dusting himself off, “Watch yourself, Potter!”

Harry and Dobby stood together watching the wizard leave the castle. Dobby was silently sobbing, the tears streaming down his face.

“Dobby,” Harry finally said.

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir?”

With a grin, Harry asked, “Can you please never try and save my life again?”

Dobby gave the boy a watery smile as he nodded his head enough to move his entire body.

“Potter, what are you doing out here?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Nothing Professor,” Harry said turning to the Deputy Headmistress.

“Get on to the Great Hall, there’s a celebration being held down there. I’m sure Miss. Granger would like to see you.”

“Hermione’s back?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Yes, Potter. Now go,” the professor said shooing him toward the gathering.

Harry ran down the stairs excited.

“Where do you think you are going, Potter?” Professor Snape asked as he came up the stairs from the dungeons as Harry made it to the first level on his way to the Great Hall.

“The Great Hall,” Harry answered nervously. “Professor McGonagall said there’s a celebration in there.”

“Yes,” Snape said, his disapproval clear. “The Headmaster saw fit to not expel you despite your clear violation of the rules.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Harry objected. “Lockhart made Neville and me show him where the Chamber was. We had to protect ourselves. You can’t give me detention for that.”

Snape raised an eyebrow at the boy’s tone but didn’t comment about it. Instead, he said, “I was not going to put you in detention, Harry. I simply wished to express my pleasure that you managed to survive your second encounter with the Dark Lord. However, your idea of detention is not without merit. I do believe I said you would regret it if you did something as foolish as your stunt at the end
of last term. Seeing as your family will not care about what happened in the chamber a letter to them will do little good. I think a three-foot essay over the summer about your actions could be of some use.”

“What?” Harry demanded. “It’s summer. Isn’t already bad enough I have to live with the Dursleys?”

Snape’s mouth quirked up at that, if only by the smallest of fractions.

“Can I go now?” Harry asked.

“You may. I look forward to reading your reflections on what happened in the chamber, Potter.” Snape said.

“Right,” Harry agreed.

Harry hoped the man was kidding. He didn’t want to spend his summer working on an essay for Snape that didn’t have to deal with Potions. Hermione ran up to meet him as he entered the hall, flinging her arms around his neck.

“I knew you could do it,” Hermione told him.

“You figured it out so much sooner,” Harry dismissed.

Harry couldn’t remember a more joyful time at Hogwarts, pending essay or no. Professor Dumbledore announced to the student body that Harry and Neville would be award Special Award for Services to the school. Hagrid returned as everyone was eating. But the single thing that got the biggest cheer was Professor Dumbledore announcing that as a special reward, term exams were canceled for the year. Harry was so happy he couldn’t even be upset about having to return to the Dursleys in a week.
Summer 1993

Harry's thirteenth birthday started off as one of his best. He received his first birthday presents from his best friends and Hagrid. Though Harry did wonder if you could call the biting book Hagrid sent his a present. But those good feelings disappeared during breakfast. Aunt Marge, who was no blood relation to Harry, as she was Uncle Vernon's equally rude sister, was coming to stay for a week.

The woman despised Harry. She would buy expensive presents for Dudley and nothing for Harry, almost goading him to ask why he wasn't getting anything. On her last visit, Harry spent hours hiding in a tree in the back garden after he accidentally stepped on the tail of her evil-tempered bulldog, Ripper. Aunt Marge refused to call him off until after midnight.

Harry made a bargain with his uncle that if he behaved himself and stuck to the ridiculous story of attending a school for juvenile delinquents, he would sign Harry's permission form to go to the village on certain weekends. Harry wished he had the ability to send messages to his friends during Aunt Marge's visit. He had to send Hedwig away. Not that his friends would have had time to reply.

As usual, Neville and his gran were visiting extended family. Hermione was in France with her parents. Even Fred and George were away. All of the Weasleys were in Egypt, a trip paid for by their dad winning a lottery drawing.

Harry probably could have managed to make it all week with someone to talk to, getting messages of support from someone who cared for him. He almost did, even without them. He dealt with countless insults to his intelligence, his manners, even how he was doomed to be a criminal. But when Aunt Marge decided to attack Harry's parents, whom she had never met, as worthless drunks, Harry had enough. He didn't mean to, he lost control of his temper and his magic causing Aunt Marge to inflate like a great tweed balloon.

Harry ignored his uncle's pleas to put her right. Instead, Harry collected his things from his room, and the cupboard under the stairs and headed off. He couldn't be in that house one more minute. He stormed his down the block, around the corner, and up six blocks before the weight of his truck and the happenings of a few minutes ago hit him.

Harry sunk down to the curb unsure what to do. He was almost certainly expelled from Hogwarts. He had used magic outside of school, in front of, and on a Muggle too. What was there to do? He would have to go on the run.

Harry flipped open the lid of his trunk looking for his wand and broomstick. A sound behind him in the bushes startled him. He looked up. He thought he saw something that may have been a dog, but it was nearly the size of a bear. He fell over trying to step away from the approaching creature, he tripped on the curb. He lost his balance and threw out his wand to catch himself. An instant later a great purple triple-decker bus came hurtling down the street stopping only a foot from where Harry lay a moment before.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus," a teen with a lot of acne spots said jumping down from the bus. "Oi, what you doin' down there?"

"I fell over," Harry said, picking himself up and dusting himself off.

"Choo fall over for?" the boy demanded.
"I didn't plan it," Harry grumbled. He looked back over his shoulder to see if the dog was still there, but it wasn't. He had taken the Knight Bus once if he remembered correctly it could take him anywhere that was above water. Now, the question was where should he go? Harry continued to look down the alley where the animal had been. Maybe he could get a better look at it with the light of the bus.

"'Choo lookin' at?" The uniformed teen asked.

"Nothing." It occurred to Harry he only had one place to go. "How much to go to Manchester?"

"Fifteenth sickles," he said looking over Harry. "Woss your name?"

Harry flattened his bangs over his lightning shaped scar. "Neville Longbottom," he said without a moment's hesitation. He hoped Neville's gran never found out.

Harry pulled out his money bag and shoved it at the conductor. He helped the young man load his trunk and Hedwig's cage onto the bus.

"This is our driver, Ernie Prang." The conductor said introducing Harry to the driver and as an afterthought added, "Me, I'm Stan Shunpike."

Harry took a seat on one of the half a dozen brass beds on the first floor of the bus. He wished he could sleep. Even if it were not for the bus jumping a hundred miles at a time, or swerving at the last second to avoid hitting houses, mailboxes, or telephone poles, Harry wouldn't be able to sleep.

Harry's nerves increased with every passing minute. How long would it take the Ministry to find him? What would he do if they expelled him? Did they ever get Aunt Marge off the ceiling? Most importantly, what would Professor Snape say about him showing up on his doorstep in the middle of the night? Maybe he should change his destination.

"Where in Manchester?" Stan asked.

"Err... It's just a village nearby. It's called Cokeworth. I need to do go down by the river..." Harry racked his brain trying to remember the name of the street Snape lived on. "Spinner's End?" He guessed.

Stan disappeared to tell Ernie. He left his newspaper on the end of Harry's bed. Harry picked up the forgotten paper. The front page was filled with the picture of a pale skinned, wild-eyed man with loads of matted black hair. Harry wondered if he was a vampire.

The man, Sirius Black, wasn't a rogue vampire, but an escaped mass murderer. Black had killed thirteen people twelve years before. He had escaped from Azkaban a few days before. He was the first person ever to do so and the Ministry organized a full-fledged manhunt for him. Somewhat controversially, the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, went so far as to inform the Muggle Prime Minister.

"This your stop in a minute," Stan said returning a few moments later.

Harry grabbed onto Hedwig's cage in one hand one end of his trunk with the other. He helped Stan carry it to the front of the bus. If it wasn't magical there was no way the triple decker bus would fit in this narrow Muggle lane. They stopped in front of the last house. Harry knew it was the right one
when he made out the outline of a very annoyed Potions Master.

"Potter," Professor Snape greeted his arms crossed over his chest. He was dressed in a heavy green bathrobe, his hair still messy from sleep.

"What didja call, Neville?" Stan asked excitedly.

"Nevermind, Mr. Shunpike," Professor Snape said turning back to the teenage fugitive. "Get inside, now. I will be in momentarily."

Harry made to grab his things but stopped when the professor snapped, "I will deal with it, Potter. Inside, now!"

Harry hurried up the garden path and inside the modest row house. He uneasily sat on the edge of one of the chairs in the living room. The professor came in a few moments later, the owl's cage and trunk floating before him. He landed them across the room, to the side of one bookcase. With a wave of Snape's wand a large silver shape erupted and then disappeared, almost as if it were running, before joining Harry in the living room.

"Explain," Professor Snape said softly.

Harry bit his lip.

"Potter, I do not take kindly to being woken in the middle of the night by the headmaster informing me a student has conducted several egregious violations of wizarding law and had now gone missing. This is doubly true when said student is not in my house, and it is summer holidays." Professor Snape seethed.

"Errr... I blew up my aunt... Not exploded or anything.... more like inflated...." Harry said after a moment.

The man raised a curious eyebrow. "Petunia..."

Harry shook his head, "No my other aunt, Aunt Marge."

"I am unfamiliar with this woman."

Harry shrugged, "She's Uncle Vernon's sister."

Professor Snape nodded. "And what pray tell could this Muggle have done to warrant such an action?"

Harry huffed indignantly. "I didn't mean to do it."

"You are already on very thin ice, Potter. Mind your temper."

Harry deflated and sank back into his seat. "She was talking about my mum and dad." The words were soft, almost too soft to hear in the nearly silent room.

Still, the man caught them, "I see. What did she have to say?"

"She was going on about them being drunks, worthless layabouts, and stuff," Harry said his voice
becoming tight, fighting back emotion.

The man rose from his seat and began to pace back and forth before the fireplace.

"These things she was saying caused you to lose your temper?" The man said turning to look at the sullen teen.

Harry nodded, "Yes, sir." He let out a loud yawn.

The professor frowned. "Come, Potter. It is late. We can discuss this matter further in the morning."

Harry spotted a clock on the mantle. "It is morning."

"It's too early for your cheek, boy. Come," the professor said with a snort of amusement. He moved the bookcase to the left side of Harry's trunk, revealing a narrow staircase. Harry followed the man upstairs.

They turned right at the top of the stairs.

"The facilities," the man said gesturing to the door at immediately at the top of the stairs. "This is where you will sleep." Professor Snape said as he opened the door at the far end of the hall. It was a small bedroom with faded cream walls. A single bed with a worn green bed cover stood to one side of the room, an old wooden desk was directly across from the foot of the bed.

"I can take the couch," Harry suggested.

"Bedrooms are where civilized people sleep, Potter." The man said rolling his eyes. "Certainly when the room will be of no use otherwise. My room is next to the bathroom. I will see you for breakfast where will have an in-depth discussion of tonight's events."

Harry took a seat on the bed. It had been a very strange night and it seemed like tomorrow was going to just as strange. He took off his glasses and placed them on the windowsill falling asleep before his head hitting the pillow.

"Potter," his name was accompanied by wrapping on the door.

Harry woke up very confused. It took him an instant to remember exactly where he was and what happened the night before. He ran a hand over his face to rub away the remaining tiredness.

"Potter," it was said louder this time.

"I'm awake," Harry called back.

"You will find your trunk in your room already. A towel is waiting for you in the bathroom if you choose to shower." That last part didn't sound so much like a suggestion as an order.

"OK," Harry acknowledged.

"Breakfast will be in twenty mornings."

With that, Harry heard the footsteps heading back down the hall. The creaky stairs gave away that the man had returned to the first floor. Harry grabbed some fresh clothes and his toiletries and padded
down to the bathroom. He made it downstairs with two minutes to spare.

"Good morning sir," Harry said slipping into one of the two chairs at the small dining table.

"Good morning," the man said setting a plate in front of Harry.

"Thanks," Harry said picking up his fork to take a bite of eggs.

"You are welcome." Professor Snape said taking a seat across Harry. "Now Potter, I would like to discuss last night."

Harry nodded slowly taking another bite of his eggs.

"Firstly, you will be relieved to know that you are not in fact expelled from Hogwarts. Nor are you in trouble with the Ministry. You can thank the Headmaster for both of those."

Harry let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"Furthermore, the Ministry workers were able to set Dursley's sister to rights. Her memory was sufficiently modified that she will have no recollection of the events. The Muggles will also take you back as long as you stay at school for Christmas and Easter holidays."

"I don't ever want to go back there," Harry objected.

"Yes, well, we can't all get what we want." The Potions Master continued. "The Headmaster and I have discussed the matter. We have come to the decision that it would be best for you to remain here for the remainder of the holidays."

"What?" Harry said dropping his fork shocked. "I can't do that, sir. I can't put you out that long. I could get a room in the Leaky Cauldron or..."

Professor Snape snorted. "It was not an invitation, Potter. This is for your safety."

Harry frowned, puzzled. "My safety?"

The man nodded. "Your safety," he confirmed. "As you live with Muggles who may not pay attention to current events, you may not be aware of the convict on the loose."

"Sirius Black?" Harry guessed.

"Yes, Black." There was a clear note of contempt in the man's voice at the name. "There is reason to believe he may have plans to come after you."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"That is unclear. Black was believed to be a great supporter of the Dark Lord."

"You don't think he was?" Harry asked.

"I am uncertain. What is known, is Black murdered one of his best friends and twelve Muggles after the fall of the Dark Lord."
"How do we know he wants to come for me?" Harry repeated.

"In the last few days before the escape, Black was heard saying, 'he's at Hogwarts.'" The professor explained.

Harry sighed.

Professor tried to reassure the boy in front of him, "The Ministry is doing everything they can to catch Black as soon as possible. There will also be increased security measures at the school. There is no reason for you to be concerned, Potter."

"OK," Harry said reluctantly.

"Good. Now, if you are finished eating you can do the dishes. When you are done with that I expect you to work on your assignments until lunch. There will be no excuse for you handing in the normal drivel you call summer homework. You also need to complete the essay I assigned you after your stunt in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry picked at the few remaining bits of food for several more minutes before clearing both his and the professor's dishes. It didn't take long to complete the chore, even doing it the Muggle way. Harry returned to the room upstairs and started working on his Transfiguration essay. He worked in the comfortable silence out from under Professor Snape's feet until the call of, "Potter," drew him back to the kitchen for lunch. Harry tired of working on essays helped the Potions Master prepare ingredients and portions for Madam Pomfrey for the upcoming term for several hours and then volunteered to cook dinner.

Professor Snape insisted they accomplish Harry's school shopping as soon as possible. Harry knew that man wanted the least chance of running across his students. Even if he was under a glamour, he didn't like seeing them Harry knew. If Harry hadn't needed new robes Professor Snape informed him he would have just collected Harry's supplies himself. Instead, it was a very quick trip to get the basics in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

The entire trip to London Harry had to listen to the professor deride his choice of new courses. Harry got cuffed upside the head when he tried to argue he had no one to ask about what classes he should take. If he didn't know better, he would have thought Professor Snape was insulted Harry hadn't consulted him.

This wasn't how Harry planned on to spend the last three weeks of his vacation. He was certain the man he was staying with never anticipated playing his host to any student, let alone, the golden Gryffindor, Harry Potter, for multiple weeks. Still, the pair fell into a comfortable rhythm. The professor rose earlier than the teen, so he would make tea and breakfast. Harry would wash the dishes before returning upstairs to work on his homework. If need be, Harry knew he could ask for assistance, a pleasant change from living with the Dursleys. After the lunch again prepared by the adult, Harry would assist with the man's work. Some days that was in the man's private lab, other times it was out in the gardens. Harry would make dinner and do the dishes afterward. In the evenings, the two then might have a game of chess or just read silently.

One evening, a few days after Harry arrived at Spinner's End, the fireplace flared to life. Harry and the professor sat across from one another a chessboard between them, looked up together as Dumbledore's head was floated in the green flames. "Good evening, Severus. May I step through?"

"Like I could stop you," the Potions Master grumbled only loud enough for Harry to hear. Still, he
waved his hand to permit the ancient wizard entry.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore greeted the teen after coming through the fireplace.

"Hello sir," Harry greeted distractedly in return.

"How are you enjoying your holidays?"

"They're fine, sir," Harry said still considering his next move.

"What can I do for you, Albus?" Professor Snape said rising from his chair.

"Oh nothing, Severus. I have come to tell you I have located a the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor," Professor Dumbledore said taking a seat next to Harry. He moved the boy's bishop to put Snape in check.

"And what sort of unqualified hack are you saddling us with this year?" Professor said not bothering to look up from the board.

Dumbledore made to move one of Snape's pieces, but his hand was smacked away by an irritated Potions Master. "I think you will find the new candidate very qualified. He has an exceptional knowledge of defensive magic, dark creatures specifically. He was in your year at school."

"Potter, upstairs," Professor Snape ordered, gesturing to the hidden steps.

"But," Harry protested.

"Now," the man insisted.

Harry rushed to comply. He didn't want to put his host in a worse mood than he seemed to be heading for. Harry had only been snapped at like that after nearly getting himself killed.

Harry could hear muffled yelling, all in Snape's obstructed baritone for the next quarter of an hour. It was another thirty minutes before Harry braved going downstairs. The headmaster was no longer there. Professor Snape sat sipping a glass of a rich amber liquid, alcohol of some sort from the smell. He wouldn't tell Harry why he was so upset, just that he believed the headmaster was a fool for making such a selection at this time. Harry heard the man muttering curses about his future colleague off and on for the next week and a half before he left for the start of term.

Harry did his best to stay out of the man's way as he looked for a book to read after giving up on his current choice. There were more than enough to choose from. Harry spent the last several days working on a thick tome he found one evening seeking a break from his studies. He didn't keep reading it because he particularly enjoyed it. Actually, he found it rather boring so far, but the inscription had caught his attention. Harry wanted to see if he could understand what it meant by reading the book. At the rate he was going, he might be out of Hogwarts before he finished it.

"What are you reading, Potter?" The man asked looking up from his potions journal on one of their last nights at Spinner' End.

Harry turned the book to show him the cover and said, "David Copperfield."

The professor raised a curious eyebrow, "Are you a fan of Dickens?"
Harry shook his head. "There is an inscription..."

"Yes, your mother presented that to me for my twelfth birthday. She thought I might identify with young Mr. Copperfield. You may keep it if you wish."

"Sir," Harry objected.

The man held up his hand to stop Harry's words. "You have very few things that are connected to your mother, Harry. That was one of her favorite novels. It should belong to you. Call it a belated birthday present if you must."

"Thanks," Harry said tucking the book a bit closer to his chest.

Professor Snape under another glamour dropped Harry off at the train station well before ten the morning of the first of September. There were a number of witches and wizards already dropping off their children. Harry left his things in the last compartment not wanting to be bothered by most of the students. He went out to joined the arriving students catching up with his friends and fellow Gryffindors.

Harry helped Neville put his things in their compartment before joining the boy and his grandmother on the platform once more. Neville proudly displayed his new wand, thirteen-inch cherry and unicorn hair wand, a gift from his grandmother replacing his father's damaged wand. It was a reward for the boy's repeated acts of bravery, she informed Harry. Neville's gran had heard from Dumbledore what Harry did running away after blowing up his aunt. The headmaster had contacted her to see if Harry had sought refuge there after the incident. The man updated her once Harry was located, even the fact he used Neville's name in the process. She made her displeasure clear to Harry about that. So Harry was more than relieved when Mrs. Weasley rescued him, by pulling him away to say hello. Hermione arrived a short time afterward.

When the trio returned to their compartment to put Hermione's things in, but it was no longer empty. A man sat in the corner, his head rest against the window, fast asleep.

"Who's he?" Hermione asked.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," Neville read from the case above their heads. "But what's he teaching?"

"Defense," Harry answered without thinking.

Hermione and Neville looked at him surprised.

"It's the only opening, isn't it? Besides, Dumbledore came to tell Snape while I was there." Harry explained. He looked at the man. He looked older than Professor Snape. This man already was very grey at the temples, he looked like a stiff breeze would blow him over. His robes were rather worn and frayed. What could Snape object to so much?

Harry caught Hermione up on the happenings of his summer. He explained all about blowing up his aunt, spending the last three weeks at Snape's. Harry also informed both of them all about what the professor said about Black and how he wanted to kill Harry.

“Oh no, Harry,” Hermione moaned. “Harry, you need to be really careful. You can't go and get in any sort of trouble this year.”
“It’s not like I go looking for trouble,” Harry complained, “It just finds me.”

The train continued its long roll up the countryside, the weather getting increasingly darker and wetter. Professor Lupin slept on. They ignored him as best they could. Hermione’s new pet cat, Crookshanks, seemed to like him. The flat-faced, bow-legged, orange beast had curled up in the professor’s lap as soon as Hermione released him from his wicker basket. The man didn’t wake when the witch came by with the snack trolley. She reassured the worried teens he could find her up with the driver if he wanted something after he woke up.

The dark skies turned to heavy rains as the day passed on. The train slowed and stopped.

“What’s going on?” Neville asked.

“We can’t be there yet, can we?” Harry asked.

Hermione checked her watch, “No, it’s too early.”

“There’s somebody out there,” Neville said looking out of the window.

The lights went out, the door began to slide open.

“Who’s there?” Harry asked.

“Ginny, I was looking for my brothers,” she said identifying herself.

“They’re not here,” Harry told her, “but you can stay.”

Ginny moved to take a seat, “Not here, I’m here.” Harry warned. She moved over.

“Quite!” A raspy voice ordered.

The instantly quieted down. The door slid open once more, Harry saw a long rotten looking hand slinking out from the sleeve of a long black robe. And it was dark…someone was screaming… a woman was screaming…”Not Harry! Please, not Harry!”

The lights were back on, Harry realized that he was on the floor.

The professor was kneeling next to him, “Are you alright, Harry?”

“Who was screaming?” Harry asked as he sat back up.

“Nobody was screaming, Harry,” Hermione said nervously.

“Yeah, Ginny was shaking like mad though,” Neville told him.

A snapping sound drew their attention away from Harry’s questions.

“Here, take this,” Professor Lupin said handing a particularly large piece of chocolate to Harry. “I need to have a word with the driver.” He said heading out of the sliding door.

“What happened?” Harry asked.
“I don’t know,” Neville said. “There was this big hooded thing, it came in the compartment.”

“Professor Lupin said, ‘None of us are hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks.’ When it didn’t leave he did something to cause a glowing light and then it disappeared.” Hermione explained.

“I haven’t poisoned that chocolate you know,” Professor Lupin said coming back into the compartment.

Harry took a bite, he was right he did feel a bit better. “What was that thing?” He asked.

“It was a Dementor, one the guards of the wizarding prison Azkaban,” Professor said smoothly. He was carefully watching Harry. The boy shifted slightly uncomfortably under his gaze.

The train did arrive at the station a few minutes later. Harry stared at the coaches. When he first rode in them on his way to the station at the end of the first year they were horseless. There was nothing pulling them, now there was a great black skeletal winged horse. Harry got into the carriage without mentioning it to his friends. They were worried enough about him as it was with a mass murderer wanting to kill him and passing out when nobody else did. Harry sat back a closed his eyes as the passed the winged-pig gates to the grounds. Two more of those hooded Dementors stood one on each side.

Apparently, the news of Harry’s collapse not only passed like wildfire all over the train but to the castle as well. Professor McGonagall collected him and Hermione before they could make it into the Great Hall to join their classmates for the Welcoming Feast. Madam Pomfrey came to check his vitals and nearly dragged him off to the Hospital Wing. Luckily, Harry insisting he felt fine and already had chocolate was enough to placate the overbearing matron. Harry had no idea what the deputy headmistress wanted Hermione for, but it only took them a few moments to discuss. The three were back with the rest of the school in time to have Draco do an overdramatic impersonation of Harry collapsing on the train, hear Professor Dumbledore warn the entire student body not to try and sneak by or fool the merciless Dementors, and introduce the new professors: Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid (the biting book made much more sense now) and Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, Remus Lupin. The applause was rather limited, but Harry’s were among the loudest. Harry didn’t miss the sullen expression of this enthusiasm on the Potions Master’s sallow face. Harry couldn’t help but wonder once more why did he hate the man so much.
Harry arrived early the next morning his sleep interrupted by nightmares of skeletal horses, decaying hands, and echoes of a woman screaming, "Not Harry!". He was the first of the third years to arrive for breakfast and collect his schedule from Professor McGonagall, grabbing Hermione and Neville's as well.

"Hermione, I think you might need to have a word with Professor McGonagall," Harry said handing her her schedule. "I think there's something wrong."

"What do you mean?" Neville asked leaning over to look at the paper in question.

It was immediately obvious looking at the document. She was marked down to be in the two to three classes in the same time period in almost every single class.

"Don't worry about it. I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall," Hermione said running her finger down Monday's list of classes. "Ohh... we're starting a few new classes today. Isn't that lovely, Care of Magical Creature right after breakfast."

"As lovely as anything can be with a biting book," Ron said darkly. "How are you going to be in three places at once? I know you're good Granger, but nobody's that good."

"Don't worry about it," Hermione dismissed once more.

The third year Gryffindors headed down to Hagrid's hut in a cheerful mood which disappeared as they drew closer to the dwelling. The Slyerthins were already there. Nobody had noticed with whom they were sharing this class.

Harry ignored Draco's repeated impersonation of him collapsing. The other boy stopped when Hagrid appeared followed by his boarhound, Fang. The class followed the giant to a small paddock on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Their first lesson was to be hippogriffs.

Draco was attacked by one of the creatures, Buckbeak after he failed to follow basic instructions and not to insult the proud beasts. The catastrophic lesson was followed by their first Divination class, one that was possibly more horrible as Professor Trelawney took special pleasure in predicting Harry's premature death after spotting a death omen, a grim in his tea leaves. Everyone was terrified that Harry might die as they rounded the next corner on their way to Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall restored his spirits slightly when she informed him that Professor Trelawney had unsuccessfully predicted the death of a student every year since arriving at Hogwarts. If he were to die, he wouldn't have to worry about turning in his assignment on Animagi.

Tuesday was more pleasant their first Charms lesson after breakfast. After Charms came their first Defense class. Harry wasn't what to expect. Professor Lupin had seemed very nice on the train. Harry was grateful the man was able to scare away the Dementor. But why did Professor Snape hate him so much? That was still bothering Harry.

The Gryffindors entered the Defense classroom for the first time. Every year it was slightly different
as it took on the personality of the new instructor. This year there were a number of posters about various creatures and a few showing how to do various spells. The students readied their books and parchment to take note on what the professor might lecture about.

The man entered the classroom whistling an unfamiliar tune, "Good morning class. You won't need your books today, only your wands. This will be a practical lesson. If you'll please follow me."

The class hurried to put their books and parchment away. The only time they had ever come close to having a practical lesson was when Lockhart released a cage full of Cornish Pixies during his first lesson. They went with him to the teacher's lounge.

The staff room was mostly empty, except for Professor Snape who sat in a corner reading a newspaper. He looked up in clear disapproval as Professor Lupin and his class entered.

Professor Snape rose from his seat, "Be warned, Lupin. Longbottom is in this class. The boy is a walking accident."

Harry frowned deeply at the Potion's instructor. He knew the man didn't like how Neville very much. Harry blamed it mostly on his friend's inability to brew. But he had never seen the teacher belittle Neville to another professor.

"Actually, Severus, I was going to ask Neville to come and help me with this," Lupin said turning to the class, he waved his hand. "Neville, if you care to join me."

"I don't need to see this," Snape said sticking his paper under his arm and storming out of the room.

"We're going to face a boggart today," Lupin said as the cabinet gave a violent shake. "Can anybody tell me what a boggart is?"

Hermione, as usual, bounced on her toes trying to get the instructor's attention.

"Hermione," Snape called.

"No one knows exactly what a boggart looks like, but it will assume the shape of the greatest fear of those it is trying to frighten," Hermione explained.

"Well, Neville, what do you most fear?" Lupin asked.

Neville said something, but it was spoken so softly, nobody could hear.

"Sorry, didn't quite hear you," Lupin said casually.

"Professor Snape," Neville said loud enough for those assembled to hear.

"Now, if I'm not mistaken, you live with your grandmother."

"Yeah, but I don't want that boggart to turn into her either."

"No, no, you miss understand me. You see the thing that finishes off a boggart is laughter. When I open the cabinet, I want you to put Professor-Boggart Snape in your grandmother's clothes. Your grandmother wears a dress normally?"
"A long green one," Neville confirmed.

"What about a handbag?"

"A big red one?"

"And her hat?"

"Has a vulture on it," Neville supplied.

"Excellent." Professor Lupin instructed the class in the spell that would enable each of them to change the boggart from something scary to funny.

Harry thought about what scared him most. First, he thought of Voldemort, not the one that he met in the first year, or the shadow of a mad like in the Chamber of Secrets, but a full restored Voldemort. Then an idea of the hand from the Dementor, slimy and dead looking coming out from its robes.

"Ready?" Lupin asked.

Neville nodded. The doors popped open and Professor Snape stalked toward Neville.

"Ridikkulus!" Neville squeaked. The boggart was transformed from the stern black robes to Neville's grandmother's clothes. The class let out a peal of laughter.

"Parvati," Lupin called.

The boggart changed into a detached mummy's hand. "Ridikkulus!" The hand was trapped in a mousetrap. For Seamus it was a banshee, it made to lose its voice. Ron a giant spider, (Harry wondered if Ron knew the two-foot tall spider was nothing compared to what Harry and Neville encountered in the forest last term.) put on rollerskates. Everyone had a turn until Harry, Lupin stepping in front of the teen. The boggart turned into a glowing silver orb. Neville finished the boggart off with a gale of laughter as Boggart Snape was dressed as Mrs. Longbottom once more.

The story of Neville's boggart flew around the school at lunch. It obviously making to Professor Snape's ears as he stared daggers at Neville as the boy filed into the classroom. The boy was more on edge on than normal. Potions was always his weakest subject, but the man's cold fury only making matters worse. Neville's Shrinking Solution that should have been a bright acid green was orange. Hermione offered to help put it right, though Snape told her to leave it alone. It was Neville's responsibility to fix it. If the potion was corrected, the toad would shrink to a tadpole, if not, Trevor would likely be poisoned. Hermione did her best to instruct Neville whispering instructions out the side of his mouth.

Harry expected the man to be anger about Neville's boggart, but never expected him to sink to trying to murder a student's pet. As Neville tried to correct his potion, Malfoy was being more obnoxious than usual as his arm was still "injured" from the hippogriff's attack. He got Professor Snape to make Harry prepare his ingredient for him. Harry ignored the Slytherin's remarks as much as he could. What he couldn't ignore was Seamus informing him that Sirius Black was spotted by a Muggle not far from the castle.

Luckily for Neville, Hermione was able to help him correct it. It was well worth the points lost for violating the teacher's instructions.
"I don't know how you lived with him," Neville said as they returned to the Tower to drop their bags before dinner.

"Shhh..." Harry said as they passed another group of students. "People aren't supposed to know about that."

"Harry," Hermione said, "is he alway like that?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't know why he's being like this? He really doesn't like Professor Lupin, but he won't say why. He spent a lot of time yelling at Dumbledore for choosing him to teach defense."

"He yelled at Dumbledore?" Neville asked.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "but like I said, I don't know why."

"He must have a reason," Hermione said thoughtfully.

Harry shrugged, "Yeah, but your guess is as good as mine."

Harry's concerns about what Professor Lupin thought about him were pushed to the side when Wood brought up Quidditch. It was captain's seventh and final year and he was determined to win the Quidditch Cup this year. They had come close, but events outside their control had always prevented their wins. Harry was glad to have the distraction. He got his thoughts away from Black's escape and the fact the mass murderer wanted him dead.

Harry headed out early for practice the second Saturday morning of term. He was having a hard time sleeping so he might as well go flying. He grabbed his broom and headed downstairs. He shoo-ed Crookshanks back toward the Common Room. Ron had spent the entire two weeks they had been back whining that Hermione's cat was after his pet rat, Scabbers. Harry was starting to think Ron was right.

Harry wandered downstairs to the Great Hall and grabbed some toast. The sky in the hall was a clear blue, perfect for a morning's Quidditch practice. He smiled as he walked out of the castle until he saw one of those creatures again, the black skeletal horse. It was flying over the forest. Another was coming to land by a small blonde girl. Harry jumped on his broom toward the girl. He wouldn't let this girl be hurt by such a creature.

She was petting its snout when he arrived. Harry dismounted very confused.

"Oh hello," the girl greeted.

"Hi," Harry said watching the girl pet the strange horse-like animal. "I thought I was going mad at the start of term."

"You're Harry Potter," the girl said looking at Harry, ignoring his comment.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "It's not hurting you."

"What? Oh, the thestral. No, they're very gentle." She said running a hand down its leathery skin. "They're beautiful aren't they?"
Harry cocked his head to the side. The thestral, is that what she called it, was very different. Its body was that of a horse, but instead of smooth hairs, it had a tight leathery skin. Harry could make out every one of the creature's ribs. It had great big white eyes, and black bat-like wings held firmly at its sides. Harry could see what she meant, in a way.

"Who was it?" The girl asked.

Harry frowned. "Who was what?"

"Who did you see die?" The casual nature of the girl's question caught Harry even more off guard.

"Err..." Harry stumbled. "How did know?" He asked instead.

"You had to have seen someone die if you can see a thestral." She pushed back a long lock of blonde hair to expose a large radish earring. "Mine was my mother. She died when I was nine. She was rather fond of experimenting with new charms."

"I'm sorry," Harry said sincerely. He waited a moment, "Professor Lockhart, down in the Chamber of Secrets last year."

"Oh, I heard about that. You saved Ginny Weasley. I like her, she's always very kind to me even when other aren't. She won't let them call me Loony Lovegood." The small girl smiled brilliantly.

They watched the thestral wander back into the forest clearly bored of their conversation.

"Yeah, Ginny is great like that." Harry agreed. "Do you want to come down to the Quidditch pitch with me? I was going to fly for awhile before the rest of the team."

Not Loony Lovegood shook her head, "No. I think I'll look for snorkacks for a little while."

"OK," Harry said slowly, trying not to show he had no clue what she was talking about. He left her walking the edge of the forest humming atonally to herself. She was out of sight before Harry realized he never got her proper name. He would have to ask Ginny the next time he saw her.

After Quidditch practice, Neville and Hermione joined Harry visiting Hagrid. They learned Draco's father was still upset and though Hagrid wasn't fired, Buckbeak, the hippogriffs would be tried by the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. All three promised they would help Hagrid with the research for Buckbeak's defense.

The next weeks were probably some of the most peaceful Harry could remember. That was until Seamus told them Sirius had been spotted in a Scottish village only a few hours away from the castle. Harry's anxiety was brought back full force. But then there was Quidditch. With Draco still feigning the Gryffindor/Slytherin was rescheduled. Instead, Gryffindor would play Hufflepuff.

Harry wasn't worried about the upcoming match. The last time they played Hufflepuff it was the shortest game in anyone's memory, Harry caught the Snitch in under ten minutes. Wood wanted everyone to take the match more seriously increasing the number of practices to four days a week. Harry only wished the weather was a bit nicer, it had started pouring two weeks and it hadn't stopped since.

The day of the game was no better. Within minutes Harry was soaked to the bone. His glasses were
completely obscured by the pouring rain. He couldn't hear the score or anything that was going on with his fellow teammates. Harry followed the other players to the ground. Wood had called a timeout. Harry found out that Gryffindor was sixty points up, but they needed to catch the Snitch soon or they would be playing into the night. Hermione also appeared, she cast an Imperturbable Charm on Harry's glasses making them waterproof.

Not he could actually see Harry cast his eyes around in search of the tiny winged golden ball. He saw but so did the Hufflepuff Seeker, Diggory. Harry spend up, but he ears became foggy. A flash of lightening illuminated the huge great black dog in the top of the stands.

There was screaming. "Not Harry! Please! Not Harry!"

Harry woke sore in the Hospital Wing surrounded by his friends and teammates. He was soon told not only had Gryffindor lost the game (Diggory wanted a rematch, he thought it wasn't fair with Harry falling off his broom) but his Nimbus 2000 had been smashed to pieces by the Whomping Willow. The reason he fell was that the Dementors had been drawn to the pitch with the elevated emotions. Dumbledore saved Harry by slowing his fall and had furiously driven off the Azkaban guards.

Harry's already bad mood at the loss of his broom was only made worse by the announcement of the first Hogsmeade visit on Halloween. He hadn't gotten Uncle Vernon to sign his permission form before he left Private Drive. There was no way he would if Harry owled it to him either, not after what happened with Aunt Marge. Maybe he could get a professor to sign it for him, the twins suggested as Harry lamented about it over lunch one afternoon.

"Sir," Harry said approaching Professor Snape's desk cautiously.

"What do you want, Potter?" The man said looking up from what he was doing.

"Well sir, I was wondering could you sign my permission form for Hogsmeade?"

"I am not your parent or guardian, Potter." Professor Snape said standing.

"I know. But Professor Dumbledore had me stay with you for those last few weeks of summer holidays. I pretty sure if you said were okay with me going he would approve." Harry explained.

A deep frown appeared on the Potions Master's face. "I am not 'okay with you going', Harry. Your uncle failed to sign your form because you performed serious magic on a Muggle in violation of wizarding law."

"I didn't mean to," Harry objected.

"Do not interrupt me," Professor Snape snapped.

Harry hung his head, "Sorry."

"If you had managed to control your temper, you would have been granted permission by your guardians. You, however, did not. As you were never punished by the Ministry or anyone else for your breaching of our laws, your inability to visit the village a perfectly acceptable consequence." Professor Snape said smoothly. "Was there anything else I can help you with, Potter."

"No sir," Harry mumbled and sulked away.
"How did it go?" Neville asked as Harry joined him and Hermione outside the dungeon.

Harry shook his head.

"I don't know why you wanted to ask him. There was no way he was going to say yes," Neville commented.

Harry shrugged, "I don't know. I guess I just thought since this summer... Never mind."

"Are you going to try someone else?" Neville asked.

"Neville," Hermione chastised.

"What? It's not fair if Harry is the only third year that can't go into the village." Neville objected.

"Yeah, yeah I will," Harry said his spirits renewed.

Neville encouraged Harry to go ask after their next Transfiguration. Hermione shook her head in disapproval. Harry walked up to his head of house's desk.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said biting his lip for a moment.

"What it is it, Mr. Potter? You have another class I'd I'm not mistaken." The woman said looking over the top of her glasses.

"Yes ma'am. I was....It's just that my family you know they're Muggles. They don't really understand about Hogwarts forms and things. I was wondering if you signed my Hogsmeade form, then maybe I could go too." Harry tried hopefully.

McGonagall's lips pursed, "No Mr. Potter, I don't think that would be appropriate. I am not your parent or guardian."

"But you're my head of house," Harry pointed out. "If you signed Professor Dumbledore would accept it."

"No Mr. Potter," she said firmly, "I am aware you already asked Professor Snape. If you wished to visit the village, you should have ensured your guardians signed the form. Now go, you don't want to be late for your next class."

Harry sighed down-trodden. Hermione and Neville were waiting for him. Harry told them she too had said no.

"It's probably for the best, Harry. You don't want to be out there with Black." Hermione said pompously.

Lee Jordan, who was good at copying things, offered to try signing for Harry. Harry shook his head. No, he accepted he would be the only one in his year not going to the village.

Harry saw his friends off that morning. He wasn't sure what he would do with his day. Oliver had loaned him a copy of *Which Broomstick* to look through so he could order a new broom. But Harry wasn't really in the mood. He could work on his Potions essay, or Defense essay maybe.
Halfheartedly he began to walk to the library.

"Harry," Lupin called, drawing Harry out of his thoughts.

Harry looked up at the man, "Hello sir."

"What are you doing, Harry?"

Harry shrugged.

"Come in and have a cup of tea," he offered.

"Okay," Harry agreed.

"I just took delivery of this," Lupin said gesturing to a tank on his desk.

The creature within smashed its face against the glass. It bore its sharp green teeth.

"It's a grindylow," Lupin explained. "I don't think he'll give us too much trouble, not after the hinkypunks. See his long fingers? They are very strong but brittle. To defeat it you need to break his grip."

Harry watched the creature shake its fist at him for a moment.

"I only have tea bags," the professor warned, "but I dare say, you've probably had enough of tea leaves for a good while."

Harry looked up surprised, "You heard about that?"

"I did. You might not be surprised that you are the talk of a great amount of gossip in the teacher's lounge," the man said handing him a chipped cup of tea.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled.

They sat in silence for several minutes each sipping their tea. Finally, Harry couldn't stand it, he had to ask.

"Sir, when we were facing the Boggart..." Harry trailed off, not sure how to continue.

"You want to know why I stopped you facing it?" Lupin finished for him.

Harry nodded.

"I thought the answer would be obvious," Lupin said setting his cup down.

Harry shook his head, "It wasn't."

"I was afraid how the class would react to a version of Voldemort appearing in the teacher's lounge," he said easily.

Harry was a bit surprised to hear the man say Voldemort's proper name. He was one of the only people he knew who said it, Professor Dumbledore being the other one.
"That's what I thought about first, but... but then I remembered that Dementor from the train," Harry told him.

"Really," Lupin asked.

Harry nodded.

"That's very interesting. That implies the thing you fear most is fear." Lupin said.

"But why do they affect me so much worse than anybody else?" Harry asked. "Nobody else on the train or at the Quidditch game collapsed."

"You've had some really horrible things happen in your past," Lupin reminded him, "far more than any of trivial matters of your classmates."

"Okay," Harry agreed. He thought for a minute, "Could you teach me how to make them go away?"

"Harry, I'm hardly an expert in Dementors," Lupin said uneasily.

"You made that one on the train go away," Harry urged. "What of they come to the next game? I need to at least be able to land."

Lupin sighed. "Very well, let me think about how to best go about this."

A knock on the door was followed by it opening, despite Lupin not having a chance to respond. In entered Professor Snape carrying a smoking goblet.

"Ahh, good afternoon Severus," Lupin greeted warmly.

Harry watched the Potions Master carry carefully set the cup on the desk. The man turned his dark eyes on Harry. Harry shifted slightly uncomfortable under the gaze even he had done nothing wrong.

"What are you doing here, Potter," Snape asked.

"I invited Harry in for a cup of tea and to show him my new grindylow. Would you care for one, Severus?" Lupin answered before Harry could say anything.

"No, thank you," Snape said curtly. "It would be wise to drink that quickly, Lupin." He said motioning to the still smoking goblet. "I have prepared an entire cauldron full should you require more."

"Thank you, I should probably take another goblet tomorrow too," Lupin said with a smile.

Snape nodded and turned to Harry. "Potter, I trust your Potions work will be better than the last drivel you turned in."

"Yes sir," Harry said automatically. His work hadn't been drivel even to Snape's rigorous standards, he received an "E" on it.

With that Snape exited the room speaking not another word. Harry watched as Lupin grimaced at the taste of the smoking concoction.
"Blach, disgusting," Lupin said setting the goblet back down. "Pity sugar makes it worthless."

"What.."

"I haven't been feeling well the last few days. Professor Snape was kind enough to brew this for me. It is the only thing that works and is rather complicated, far beyond my potions skills." Lupin explained.

Harry nodded. "Professor Snape, he doesn't..."

"Like me very much," Lupin finished. "No, we were at school together and never got along." He said honestly.

"I really should get to that Potions essay," Harry said rising from his chair.

"Yes, you don't want to get on the wrong side of Severus," Lupin said.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I learned that this summer."

The man cocked his head to the side. Harry shook his head.

"I...err...sort of stayed with him for a little while during the summer...after I blew up my aunt," Harry explained.

"You will have to explain that to me another time," Lupin said with a chuckled.

"Okay," Harry promised. "I'll see you later, Professor."

Harry returned to the Gryffindor Common Room and did work on his Potions essay until Hermione and Neville returned to the castle. They came back carrying all sorts of sweets from Honeydukes. They described in great detail about all the places in the village. It sounded like they had gone everywhere and done everything. He was glad the had fun. He just wished he could have been with them.

Harry finally got to talk about his own afternoon as they walked downstairs to join the rest school for the Halloween feast. The meal was wonderful as always. Harry was sure that it would have tasted even better after a day full of treats in the village.

The meal was filled with jokes and stories. Harry got to hear about the rest of his classmates spent their day. Many were like Hermione and Neville, they all seemed to go everywhere. After everyone ate their fill, they all watched the Hogwarts ghosts perform some formation gliding, it was time to return to Gryffindor Tower and head to bed. But there was a backup at the portrait of The Fat Lady, the guardian of Gryffindor House.

Percy Weasley, this year's Head Boy, and oldest Weasley still at school shoved his way to the front. He found the painting ripped, large gashes in the canvass. He ordered somebody to find the headmaster. Professor Dumbledore and all the heads of house appeared a few minutes later. The Fat Lady Lady informed the Headmaster who it was that slashed her picture. It was Sirius Black!

The Gryffindors were joined in the Great Hall by the rest of the houses as the teachers began their search for Black. Professor Dumbledore waved his wand and hundreds of purple sleeping bags
appeared on the floor. The story of what happened spread like wildfire as everyone settled in for the
night. The biggest question was of course how the mass murderer had gotten into the castle.

Harry listened to all of them. Hermione increasingly grew more impatient as she repeatedly heard
people suggesting Black Apparated into the school. This was something the Hogwarts wards
prevented. Anyone who read Hogwarts a History would know that. Harry was fairly certain
Hermione was the only person he knew who had read it, and definitely the only who memorized
sections of it.

The whispering went late into the night. Harry's ears perked up as footsteps came by where he was
"sleeping". He heard Professor Dumbledore tell Percy how they weren't able to find Black. He also
heard Professor Snape insisting Dumbledore ask Lupin about it. Harry knew he didn't like the
Defense professor, but why would he think he was helping Black?

Professor McGonagall called Harry into her office the following morning to discuss the break-in. She
was relieved to hear Professor Snape hadn't hide the fact Black was believed to be after Harry. She
insisted that all Gryffindor practices be supervised a professor. She also wanted Harry indoors before
dark, unless accompanied by a professor. Harry agreed with her new rules, the only other choice was
to quit Quidditch and he wasn't going to do that.

Harry met Wood on his way to Defense Against the Dark Arts that afternoon. The older boy talked
to Harry so long that he was already five minutes late before he left the team captain still wanting to
discuss how practice would change under the watchful eye of a teacher. Harry ran down the halls
trying to get to class and cause the least disruption possible.

Harry threw the door open, "Sorry Professor Lu...What are you doing here?" Harry demanded,
realizing it was not Professor Lupin teaching the class, but Professor Snape.

"How nice of you to join us, Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape said icily.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" Harry demanded, not moving from where he stood.

"He is feeling unwell and I am covering his class until he has recovered. Now take your seat, Potter
or it will be detention." Snape snapped.

Harry hurried to his desk beside Neville.

"As I was saying before Potter so rudely interrupted, Professor Lupin has failed to provide any sort
of documentation as to what you have covered so far," Snape said turning back to the rest of the
class once more.

Hermione put up her hand, "Sir, we've covered boggarts, hinkypunks, grindylows, red cap,
kappas..."

"I was not asking you, Miss Granger. I was simply making an observation about the lack of
organization. Nastily Snape added, "And five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn."

"That's not fair," Parvati Patel complained.

Snape ignored the comment, "As there is no record of what we are meant to cover today we will
discuss werewolves."
"We're not meant to cover werewolves until the spring," Hermione objected. "We're meant to start...

"That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger. Do so again and it will be a week's detention you insufferable know-it-all."

"Oi," Hermione's least likely defender, Ron Weasley chimed in. "She was just trying to tell you what we're supposed to be doing you, slimy git," Ron called Hermione a know-it-all at least once a week, but his contempt for Professor Snape was far greater.

"Detention Weasley," Snape said lazily. "Now turn your books to page 394."

There was a moment as everyone waited to see if someone else would speak up, but they all dug into their bags for the required text. Professor Snape lectured for the remainder of the class and set them a two-foot long essay due to him on Monday. Again, Harry wondered what Lupin did to make Snape hate him so much.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry posting this late. I hope you all enjoy this chapter and will forgive me for the delay.
Much to the Gryffindors' relief, Professor Lupin was back in class for their next meeting. He was immediately overwhelmed by his students' complaints about their substitute's handling of the class. Voice over voice tried to be heard of the unjustness.

"Two feet."

"Werewolves..."

"A week's detention..."

Professor Lupin raised his hand trying to quiet the class. "You don't have to do the essay," he promised. "I'll have a word with Professor Snape about it."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, that was all, except Hermione.

"I've already done it," she moaned.

“Professor Lupin,” Harry asked walking up to the desk at the end of the lesson.

“How can I help you, Harry?” Lupin said shutting his battered leather case.

“You said you could help me with the Dementors. I was wondering when we could start our lessons.”

Lupin looked more tired than usual. “I’m sorry, Harry. We will have to wait until after the holidays. I fell ill at a rather unfortunate time. I need to catch up with the lesson and will be away for the break.”

“Yes sir,” Harry said resignedly, “I understand.”

“Don’t worry, Harry. We’ll have you in top shape before you play your next match.” Lupin reassured with a tired smile.

Harry gave his own weak smile, “Yes sir.”

“What was that about?” Neville asked.

“You weren’t trying to see if he would sign your Hogsmeade form were you?” Hermione demanded.

Harry shook his head, “Of course not. Even if I did, there’s no way McGonagall would accept it. She was pretty mad at me for asking Professor Snape. I don’t know if she knew about me staying with him.”

“I think she would,” Neville guessed. “She’s the one who sends out the letters every summer.”

Harry frowned. “Dumbledore brought my letter this summer when he came to talk to Professor Snape.”

Neville shrugged, “Still.”

“Maybe,” Harry agreed.

“If you didn’t ask him to sign your form, what did you ask him about?” Hermione asked.
“I wanted to know when we could start our Dementor lessons,” Harry explained. “I want to start as soon as possible.”

“What did he say?” Hermione asked uneasily.

“He said we can’t start until after the holidays,” Harry said. “Why?”

Hermione shook her head, “No reason.”

Harry looked at his friend. There was something she wasn’t saying. “What is it, Hermione?”

“It’s nothing,” Hermione insisted. “I’m just tired. It will be nice to have a bit of break, won’t it?”

Harry watched his friend carefully over the next several classes. She seemed to have developed an odd sort of discomfort around the Defense instructor. She was more hesitant to answer questions in his class, something she had never done in the entire time he knew her. He tried to ask her what was wrong, but she always avoided answering his question directly. She blamed it on being tired. She was taking more classes than anyone else.

In addition to taking Care of Magical Creatures and Divination with Harry and Neville, she was taking Muggle Studies (much to Harry’s confusion as she was Muggle-born), Arithmancy, and Ancient Ruins. How she managed to get to all her classes was another thing that confused Harry. Half of her Muggle Studies were at the same time as Care of Magical Creatures, but according to Ernie McMillan, she had never missed one class of Muggle Studies. Harry knew for a fact she hadn’t missed Care of Magical Creatures. Hermione was even more vague about her answer about that.

Even with all of her classwork Hermione was still helping Harry and Neville with their research in the defense of Buckbeak. Harry tried to help as much as possible, but he had Quidditch practice three nights a week. He was using an old school broom at the moment. He would have to buy a new one soon, but he still couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Snow arrived a heavy coating covered the castle and the grounds. Hagrid brought in salamanders, fire-loving lizard-like animals. All they had to do for the class was make sure the fire was well stoked, a task happily done on a cold blustery day. The giant was in a better mood, hopeful about Buckbeak’s upcoming trial. He was sure there was no way they could lose not with all the research the three had put in. The hippogriff’s trial was on the first day of winter holidays.

The last day of term came with another trip to Hogsmeade. Harry once again said goodbye to his friends at the door. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do with the day. He was looking forward two weeks without any classwork, so he wasn’t going to do homework. Dumbledore said that Dementors weren’t to be fooled by invisibility cloaks, so that wasn’t an option. He really wished he could go to the village.

The twins presented Harry with the desired escape. They gave him a map, the Marauder’s Map, which showed not only the rooms of the castle, the names and locations of everyone in there, but seven secret passages in and out of the grounds. Fred and George steered Harry away from the three they believed the caretaker Filch knew about. They pointed out an entrance through a statue of a witch on the third floor. Harry would only need to tap the witch’s hump and he could enter the tunnel that ended in the cellar of Honeydukes Sweetshop. The twins left the map with Harry with the strict instructions to say, “Mischief Managed”, or anyone could read it.

Harry couldn’t contain his excitement. He barely checked the coast was clear before jumping down the witch’s hump and running all the way down the long tunnel. He should have thought to return to the Tower for his Cloak of Invisibility, or at least his coat, hat, and gloves. He was able to find
Hermione and Neville with surprising ease. They were in the sweets shop when he arrived.

Hermione was worried that if Black were to show up Harry would be in danger. Harry argued he would have a hard time finding him in the see of students doing their Christmas shopping. Still, she wanted him to go to Professor Dumbledore with the map in case that was how the fugitive was entering the grounds. If he wouldn't go to Dumbledore to at least tell Professor Snape. If Harry told Professor Snape he snuck out of the castle and into the village he Harry would spend every weekend for the rest of his time at Hogwarts scrubbing down the loos with a toothbrush. Where was Hermione's Christmas spirit?

The cold, biting weather cut short their sightseeing, with Harry lack of proper clothing. The trio decided the best thing to do was get a warm drink at the Three Broomsticks. Neville went to get them drinks while Harry and Hermione found them a small table tucked away near the large joyfully decorated Christmas tree. It was hard to find anyone in the busy establishment, but when Hagrid entered he was hard to miss, so too were his company, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and the Minister of Magic.

The new group came and sat just on the other side of the tree. Hermione forced Harry under the table so they couldn't possibly see him. Neville joined them as they listened to the Minister discuss the matter of Dementors in the village and the escape of Sirius Black with the owner of the pub, Madam Rosmerta.

She remembered Peter Pettigrew, a dumpy little boy whose friends were far more talented, an observation attested to by his professors. She also remembered who Black's best friend was, James Potter. Black was the Potter's Secret-Keeper, he alone was responsible for knowing the location of where Harry and his family lived. The only Voldemort could know was if Black told him. If that was not hard enough to hear, it turned out Black was Harry’s godfather as well.

Harry didn't remember getting back to the castle that afternoon. He went straight to bed when he did pretending to be asleep when Neville came to check on him hours later. Harry kept twisting over what he heard all night. He even found the pictures of Black and Pettigrew in his album. He had never paid much mind to them before.

The next morning Harry woke late, the rest of the boys already gone on the train. Even fewer students stayed for the holidays this year as their parents worried about their safety. Neville wanted to stay but his grandmother demanded he come home. She was scared the security of the class would be even laxer with fewer students to protect. Neville had spent a week owling back and forth about his ability to stay before she finally agreed after getting several concessions from the Headmaster. This would be his first Christmas away from home.

Harry was angry. Why hadn't anyone told him it was Black's fault Harry had no parents? Why had no one mention he had a godfather? How many people knew about all of this?

Harry wanted to demand answers from anyone that could possibly answer. Hagrid was one of the first that came to mind. But all that was driven out of their minds once they heard the results of Buckbeak's trial. Hagrid lost, if he didn't win the appeal, Buckbeak would be executed.

The three friends spent the next week either visiting with Hagrid or doing more research. The days blended into one another as they went even deeper into trying to save their friend's pet's life. It was only when they came down the stairs on Christmas morning and a large pile of gifts lay under the tree, Harry realized what day it was.

Hermione gave him a large box of chocolate frogs. From Neville, he received a book on the Quidditch teams of England and Northern Ireland. Mrs. Weasley sent him his normal sweater, green
this year featuring a golden snitch across his chest. Harry put aside the package of rock cakes from Hagrid.

There was one last package with Harry's name on it. There was no note, no card, just the simply wrapped box. Harry excitedly pulled back the paper and the lid of the box. Inside was the most beautiful broom Harry had ever seen. Not a single twig was out of place. Golden letters down the handle spelled out, "Firebolt". Harry knew that this was one of the best brooms ever to be sold.

"Who sent it?" Neville asked.

"I don't know. There wasn't a note." Harry said walking around the broom as it hovered at perfect mounting height.

"This is a rather good broom," Hermione observed.

"It's the best in the world," countered Harry.

"So who would get it for you?" Hermione asked once more.

"Professor McGonagall," Neville offered, "she's nearly as mad you win the Quidditch Cup this year as Wood."

Harry shook his head. "She said she might be able to get me a Nimbus 2001, like Malfoy. Anyway, she only got me one the last time because I was the first year."

"Dumbledore likes you," Neville tried again. "He gave you your cloak."

"That was already mine, he was just borrowing it," Harry objected. "We know it's not from Lupin," Harry said with a laugh.

"No," Hermione agreed uneasily, "It wouldn't be."

Harry tore his gaze away from his new broom for a moment. He still didn't know what was causing the girl's sudden uneasy with the professor.

"I don't think it's a good idea to ride that now, Harry," Hermione said.

"What? Why?" Harry demanded.

"We don't know who sent it. What if somebody wanted to hurt you?"

"Like who?"

A heavy silence hung between the two.

"How could Sirius Black get Harry a broom?" Neville finally asked.

Hermione shrugged, "We order things through the post all the time. Harry, he could have jinxed it to throw you off."

"That's ridiculous!" Harry snapped. "We’re not murders on the run, Hermione."

"Harry, please," Hermione begged.

Christmas dinner was a tense affair with Harry not wanting to talk to Hermione. Neville sat awkwardly between his two friends, trying to get them to engage in conversation. When Professor
McGonagall came and confiscated the broom so it could be checked that it wasn't cursed Harry stopped speaking to Hermione altogether. He still wasn't speaking to her when the rest of the students returned from the holidays.

Wood was annoyed to hear that Harry still hadn't ordered a new broom. Harry explained why and Wood promised to discuss the matter with Professor McGonagall. Ron too was offended that Hermione would turn over a brand new Firebolt to be "stripped down", what if it did throw Harry off. How could somebody do something like that to a gorgeous new broom?

Harry was glad to hear Professor Lupin was ready to start their Dementor lessons on Thursday evening. He needed a distraction especially when Wood said that he wasn't able to get Harry's new broom back. Even though he didn't know what to expect Harry was looking forward to the lessons.

Harry walked into the Charms classroom about ten minutes early he lite the torches and waited. He looked at the posters Professor Flitwick had hung up demonstrating different charms. He was starting to wonder if Professor Lupin was coming when the door behind Harry opened. The man had a large battered case under one arm.

"Good evening Harry," he greeted warmly setting the case on top of Professor Flitwick's desk.

"Good evening," Harry replied looking at the case.

"Ahhh... Yes...this is what we'll be using to practice," Professor Lupin explained as he ran a hand over the old worn leather. "Now Harry, I must warn you the magic we are going to try here tonight is far beyond Ordinary Wizarding Levels. There are many fully qualified wizards that aren't able to do this."

"But I have to try," Harry insisted, "What if they come to the next match?"

"Yes, I understand. I simply felt I needed to ensure you knew how difficult is what we'll be trying to do here."

Harry nodded, "Okay, so what do I have to do?"

Lupin removed his wand, "The incantation is 'Expecto Petronum'."

"Expecto Petronum'," Harry repeated.

Lupin smiled softly, "Very good. Now a properly conjured Patronus will defend you from a Dementor."

"What do they look like?" Harry asked excited, brain coming up with giant shields the size of Hagrid.

"Each is unique to the witch or wizard that creates it," Professor Lupin said. "But saying the words is not enough, you'll need to think of a happy memory to go along with it."

Harry frowned, a happy memory? Obviously, anything that happened at the Dursleys was out. He decided on the first time he ever flew a broom.

"Now try it without the Dementor," Lupin encouraged.

"Expc...Expecto Petromem...Sorry..."
"Take your time," Lupin reassured.

"Expecto Petronum," Harry tried once more and a thin silver cloud burst out of his wand. "I did it."

"You ready to try? On the count of three..."

Harry nodded, his palms sweaty in anticipation. "Expecto Petronum... Expecto Petronum..." Harry muttered as Professor Lupin pulled back the lid of the case.

The room went cold, the torches extinguished.

"Expecto Pec...Expecto... Expecto Petronum."

There was a cold high-pitched laugh, the screaming, "Not Harry! Please! Not Harry! Take me. Please, not Harry."

The cold high different d voice, "Stand aside you silly girl."

"Please, not Harry..."

"Harry. Harry," a different voice said this time.

Harry realized he was flat on his back on the floor. The torches were lit once more. Lupin helped Harry groggly sit up.

"That's one heck of a Dementor," Harry groaned

"That wasn't a Dementor. It was a Boggart. If it was a Dementor you would have collapsed as soon it was in the room," Lupin said crouching next to Harry. He removed a chocolate frog and handed it to the teen. "Eat this before we go again."

Harry shoved half of the chocolate into his mouth. The cold sweat on his back easing, warmth returning to the tips of his fingers.

"Harry, what was the memory you chose?" Lupin asked standing back up.

Harry pushed back his sweaty hair, "The first time I rode a broom."

Lupin shook his head, "No wonder you collapsed. That's not happy enough, not nearly happy enough."

"Oh," Harry said softly. He finished the frog as he tried to come up with another happy memory. He decided that Gryffindor winning the House Cup at the end of his first year was probably one of the happiest times he could remember. He stood back up.

"Ready for another go?" Lupin asked.

Harry nodded. The lid was pulled back once more...

Hard tried to ignore the screaming in his ears. "Expecto...Expecto Petronum..."

Everything was cold and dark once more.

"Not Harry! Please! Not Harry! Take me. Please, not Harry."

The cold high different d voice, "Stand aside you silly girl."
"Please! Not Harry."

"Go, Lily! He's here..."

It was all black...

Harry felt his professor shaking his shoulder again.

"I heard my dad," Harry said sitting up again.

"You heard James?" Lupin asked softly.

Harry nodded, "Did you know him too?"

Lupin smiled, "I did we were in the same year at school."

Harry grinned as he took another frog from his teacher. He didn’t know much about his dad.

Professor Snape mentioned him on occasion, but normally when Harry had done something idiotic
and Gryffindor. Other people said that he looked a lot like his dad, but that didn’t mean much he
didn’t know what he was like.

“Really? What was he like?” Harry asked excitedly.

Lupin grinned, “James was incredibly brave. He was an excellent flyer, just like you. He also played
Seeker. He had a penchant for trouble. From what I hear, you seem to have inherited that from him."

Harry could see that the man wanted to say more, but there was something stopping him. Harry just
wasn’t sure what. Maybe it was the same thing that stopped Professor Snape when he talked about
Harry’s mum.

“Do you want a try another go tonight, Harry?” Lupin asked after a moment.

“Yeah, I think so,” Harry said readying himself once more.

“Three...Two... One...” the lid opened once more.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry tried again, a wisp of silver smoke came out of his wand the laughter
and screaming weren’t overpowering this time, more like it was coming through a poorly tuned
radio. Harry forced the Dementor back into the case.

“Alright, that’s enough for tonight,” Lupin said snapping shut the lid of the case. He removed a large
bar of Honeyduke’s chocolate. “Make sure you eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will have my skin.”

Harry chuckled, “Yes sir. Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Harry. I will see you in class tomorrow,” Lupin said picking up his case once more. “I
have a cabinet in my office that I think he’ll like between lessons.”

Harry nodded and headed back to the Tower munching on the chocolate Lupin gave him. He had
managed to produce a wisp of a Patronus. It would never scare off a real Dementor, maybe not even
give him enough time to land, but it was only his first lesson. But Harry had, to be honest with
himself, no matter how much he hated it, he wanted to hear his parents again.

“What are you doing, Potter?” Professor Snape demanded.

“Just going back to the Tower, sir,” Harry said shoving the last bit of chocolate into his pocket.
“Out a bit late, did you manage to get detention already.”

Harry shook his head, “No sir, Professor Lupin is helping me. He’s giving me Dementor lessons.”

Snape raised a curious eyebrow.

“Er...He’s teaching me to cast a Patronus,” Harry clarified.

“I see,” Snape said softly. “Get back to your house, Potter. It’s almost curfew.”

Harry rushed off once again wondering what made the two professors not like each other so much.

Harry watched the two men the next morning at breakfast. He was right, Snape glared at Lupin more than usual. Harry shook his head and went back to his breakfast.

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Apparently, Hermione now thought like Snape, that in and of itself concerned Harry. She made little sounds of displeasure when she heard Harry telling Neville about his Dementor lessons. She wouldn’t what had caused her sudden change of heart though.

When Harry finally demanded after yet another disapproving tut, her response was, "I don't think it's such a good idea being alone with him."

"Why?" Harry snapped.

"It's it obvious?" She said before storming off once more.

Harry turned to Neville who only shrugged. The two spent less time with her since Professor McGonagall came and took Harry's broom. But even so, they could tell she was increasingly on edge the pressure of her studies catching up with her. She could normally be found in one corner of the Common Room books piled high around her. She would snap at anyone that tried to disturb her. She worked into the late night to complete all of her assignments. Still, Harry was trying to figure out how she did it. How could she be in two places at once?

Harry liked his Dementors lessons. He was getting better. He wasn't collapsing anymore and he could now produce a Patronus every time, but wanted to still do better. It still didn't have a true form or chase down the Boggart-Dementor. Harry chastised himself, he would never get any better if he still halfheartedly wanted to hear his parents.

"Thank goodness you're here," Neville said meeting his friend at the top of the stairs returning from his latest Dementor practice.

"What's wrong Neville?" Harry asked.

"That mad painting won't let me into the Tower," Neville explained.

"I thought you had all of this week's passwords written down," Harry asked.

The painting of Sir Cadogan replaced The Fat Lady while she was repaired. The rather balmy knight enjoyed coming up with complicated passwords that were hard for anyone to remember, it was practically impossible for Neville with his horrible memory for that sort of thing.

"I can't find it," Neville moaned.

"It's no problem. The current password is 'flibbity gibit.'"
They walked back to the portrait, Harry cut off Sir Cadogan with the password before he could say anything about Neville. A group of students stood in the center of the room.

"What's that all about?" Neville asked.

"Can I have a ride, Harry?" Seamus asked.

"Me too?" Ron asked. "I've never gotten to ride a new broom."

Wood brought Harry over his Firebolt. "Professor McGonagall brought this back a few minutes, Potter. She wanted you to have a proper broom for the next match."

"Everything was fine?" Harry asked.

"Must have been if she gave it back," Fred said joining the crowd.

The excitement of the crowd lasted late into the night. Harry knew he should apologize to his friend but he couldn't find her in the common room. Lavender told him that she had gone to bed early.

Harry followed his roommates upstairs when Percy came down to chase them all to bed. They were woken up only a few hours later by Ron screaming. He had woken up to Sirius Black standing over him with a large knife.

The professors had escorted everyone to the Great Hall once more. He had gotten into the Tower with the passwords. A furious Professor McGonagall banned Neville from any future visits to the village. The harder thing was he was not allowed to know the password, no one was allowed to give it to him either.

Harry didn't get a chance to speak with Hermione while the teachers checked the castle once more. Wood had decided that now their Seeker had a proper broom they needed an extra practice so Harry didn't get back to Gryffindor Tower until late the next evening.

“Harry,” Neville called as Harry came through the portrait hole.

“What?” Harry asked.

“We need to talk to Hermione,” Neville told him.

“Why?” Harry grumbled. He still hadn’t forgiven her for getting his new broom confiscated. He didn’t have to wait very long to find out why.

“It was your bloody cat!” Ron yelled across the Common Room.

“There’s no way to know it was Crookshanks,” Hermione yelled back.

“He’s been after Scabbers since we got back after summer hols,” Ron countered.

“I don’t see why he’s complaining,” Fred said coming to join Harry and Neville. “He never liked that dumb rat.”

“He’s looked awful for ages, been losing weight since Egypt,” George added.

“Why does he think Hermione’s cat did it?” Neville asked.

Harry shrugged, “He does seem to be more focused on Scabbers than the other cats. He was always trying to sneak into our dorms.”
“Really?”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “He’s pretty easy to recognizable with that smashed face.”

“You don’t care about anybody but you’re stupid cat. Nobody likes you,” Ron hollered.

Hermione couldn’t stand it anymore at went running up the stairs, tears streaming down her face.

“Oi! You git,” Fred said calling out his youngest brother. “That was over the line, mate.”

“Yeah, we’re sorry her orange beast ate your dumb rat. You never liked the dumb thing, but he’s in a better place now filled with custard tarts and plenty of comfortable places to nap,” George continued.

"Look, there's a Hogsmeade visit next weekend, you can get a new pet then."

"Yeah alright," Ron sulked and went up the opposite stairs to the boy’s dormitory.

"There's another Hogsmeade trip?" Harry asked.

"It's not like we can go," Neville pointed out.

"I wasn't supposed to go at Christmas either," Harry pointed out.

"How about you come with us," Fred offered. "You in Neville?"

The round-faced boy shook his head.

"Fine," Fred said with a shrug. "We'll meet you in Honeydukes then."

The morning of the trip arrived. Harry said goodbye to Hermione at the castle doors and the twins too with a wink. He checked the map and made his way up the corridor with the One-Eyed Witch. He just got the hump open when he heard steps behind him. Harry dropped his cloak down the tunnel and shut the opening, spinning around to see who was coming.

Harry’s heart dropped, it couldn’t have been worse. In his haste, he hadn't noticed Professor Snape's name in the proximity.

"Potter! What are you doing here?" The man snapped as he came down the corridor his black robes flapping behind him like a great bat.

"Nothing," Harry said sounding like a small child caught with hand in the biscuit jar.

The man stared down his long nose at the boy. "Potter..."

“Nothing,” Harry insisted refusing to make eye contact with the teacher.

“Look at me,” Snape ordered.

Harry looked up defiantly, his chest puffed out. He hadn’t done anything wrong… yet.

Snape’s fiery onyx gaze burned into Harry. The teen tried his best to stay calm. He had not done anything wrong. There was no reason he could be in trouble for simply being in the corridor. Still, Snape had a way of finding things out.

“Stay here,” Snape ordered Harry as he inspected the One-Eyed Witch’s statue in great detail. He ran his hand over the hump, muttering to himself. The hump did not open. Harry scuffed the toe of his
right trainer on the stone floor as he watched his professor disappear behind trying to reveal the witch’s secrets. After what felt like ages the man stood up straight once more.

“Come with me, Potter,” Snape ordered.

“What did I do?” Harry demanded.

A stern look from the Potions Master quieted any further protests from the teen. Harry followed the man silently down to the dungeons.

“Empty your pockets, Potter,” Snape ordered.

“Sir,” Harry asked.

“I said empty your pockets. If you have been in the castle you should have nothing to worry about. Do not make me repeat myself.”

Harry hadn’t left the castle yet, but the contents of his pockets made his intentions clear. He had his money bag full of coins destine for Zonko’s and Honeydukes and more importantly, the Marauder’s Map. He was glad he had cleared before putting it in his pocket in preparation for entering the tunnel under the witch. He pulled out the old parchment with great caution.

“Now, Potter,” Snape ordered.

Harry put the parchment on the table followed by a small sack of coins, a chocolate frog, and a broken quill.

(Is that all,” Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes sir,” Harry said patting his pockets.

“What’s this?” The man said picking up the Marauder’s Map, that was thankfully blank.

“Just a spare bit of parchment,” Harry said a little too quickly.

“It’s rather old to just be a spare bit of parchment,” Snape said looking it over once more. “If it’s only a spare bit of parchment you won’t mind if I burn…”

“No!” Harry said lunging forward.

Snape held it higher out of Harry’s reach. “So, it’s more than a bit or parchment then. What is it?”

“Nothing,” Harry said with a shrug. But it was too late, his actions said exactly the opposite.

Snape removed his wand and ran it over the map, “Reveal your secrets!”

Nothing happened.

“I, Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, command you to reveal your secrets.” Snape tried again, his temper rising.

Harry held his breath as words began to appear before them.

“Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his
Snape stood frozen, as he read the words. But there was more…

“Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony, and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git.”

Harry would have laughed if it wasn’t so serious. And still, there was more….  

“Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor.”

Harry closed his eyes not sure if he could deal with anymore. When he opened them there was one last line on the map...

“Mr. Wormtail bids, Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball.”

“What... We’ll see about this….” He crossed the room and threw a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. “Lupin, a word.”

Harry waited anxiously as they waited for the Defense professor to make his appearance.

“Severus,” Lupin greeted, “and Harry,” he said noticing the nervous teen.

“You’re supposed to be the expert in Dark objects, Lupin. Care to explain,” Snape said pointing to the map still sat in the center of the desk. “Obviously this is serious dark magic.”

Lupin looked it over, Harry thought he might be trying not to laugh. “Serious dark magic,” He said standing up again. “No, this looks more like a Zonko’s product to me. It’s designed to insult anyone who looks over I expect.”

“Zonko’s? The asinine names of the authors are surprisingly familiar. Is it not more likely that the boy inherited it from one of them?” Snape asked coldly.

“Inherit? From whom, Severus? Lily and James’ house was destroyed after the attack by Voldemort.” Professor Lupin scoffed, “Why not simply ask the boy?”

The men looked at Harry who said nothing. The boy stared back, unsure what to say. He couldn’t tell them that it was his friends. Harry sighed in relief as some knocked on the door.

“Professor Snape,” a first or second year Slytherin said coming into the room.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Jones.” Lupin greeted warmly.

“Uhhh...Hello, sir,” the boy said nervously. “I can come back.”

“No. No, don’t let us keep you.” Lupin waved the boy off. “I’ll be taking this, Severus. As you say, it is my area of expertise. Come along, Harry,” the professor instructed.
Harry could feel the Potions’ Master’s dark eyes boring into the back of his head until they made it to
the first floor, even if he had never actually left his office. Harry followed Lupin into a small chamber
off the main hall.

“I don’t care how you got hold of this map,” Lupin said. This was the angriest Harry had ever heard
him. “Yes, I know it is a map. I also am well aware Mr. Filch confiscated it many years ago.”

“How..” Harry began.

“I assume Severus caught you trying to sneak out of the castle and found this in your pockets.”

Harry didn’t say a word.

“So like James,” Lupin sighed. “How could you do this, Harry? Your parents, some of my best
friends gave up their lives so you could live. This is how you chose to repay their sacrifice sneaking
out of the castle to what? Buy a couple of cheap tricks and candies? Is that all they mean to you?”

Harry stood there stunned.

“Go!” Lupin said pointing in the direction the stairs, “think about what your parents mean to you and
what might have happened if Black had found you this afternoon.”

Harry still speechless left the man still standing in that small room. He didn’t stop when we got the
Common Room, he continued straight to his dorm. He pulled the curtains on his bed, the photo
album Hagrid gave him once more laying open in his lap. He wasn’t trying to find his murderous
godfather this time. He ran a finger over the first photo, his parents dancing in a public park.

Harry shook his head, trying to shake off his emotion. How could he have been so stupid? Lupin
was right. His parents were worth more than a trip to Hogsmeade. How did Lupin know how to
operate the map? What did Snape mean did Harry inherit it? Why would Lupin recognize those
names?

“Harry?” Neville asked nervously.

Harry hesitated, “What is it, Neville?”

“Are you alright? I thought you were… you were going to sneak into the village.”

“I didn’t.” Harry sighed.

“This is ridiculous,” Hermione huffed pulling back the curtains.

“Oi, Hermione, you’re not supposed to be here,” Harry objected.

“Hermione he could have been indecent,” Neville added.

Hermione rolled her eyes, “Don’t be ridiculous. He’s just having a sulk.” She sat on the edge of
Harry’s bed. “What happened?”

“You’re right. It was a horrible idea.” Harry admitted. “Anyways, Snape caught me.”

Neville gasped. “How long are you in detention?”

“I’m not. I hadn’t left yet,” Harry informed them.
“You’re lucky he caught before you left the castle, not after,” Hermione said. “You would have been lucky to only get detention.”

Harry nodded, “He didn’t couldn’t prove I had done anything wrong. He called Lupin to look at the map. Lupin knew exactly what it was. He confiscated it.”

“How could he know about the map?” Neville asked.

Harry shrugged, “Don’t know. Snape seemed to think I might have inherited it. Who could that have been from?”

It was Neville’s turn to shrug. “The cloak used to be your dad’s. Maybe he thought Dumbledore gave it to you too.”

“I don’t think so.” Harry shook his head. “He made it sound more like I got it from Lupin.”

Hermione tensed at the idea.

“What is it, Hermione?” Harry demanded.

“Nothing,” the girl said dismissing Harry on the matter once more. “Why don’t we go see what’s for dinner?”

“Hey Harry,” Fred greeted. “Where were you?”

Harry shook his head. “Didn’t make it. Sorry.”

“As long as you didn’t get caught,” George said.

The three friends shared a look but did not correct the twins assumption. Harry didn’t have detention or anything after all. He had missed the last Hogsmeade trip of the year. Now all there was to look forward to was Quidditch and the end of term.
It seemed Harry to the whole school cared more than usual about the approaching match. Everyone wanted Slytherin defeated. Even the professors were taking an interest in the game. Professor Flitwick refused to assign homework for the weekend. Professor McGonagall too did not give homework, but she threatened to double it if the house didn't win the match. Professor Snape took points when Harry arrived late because his protective detail delayed him.

None of it mattered though. Gryffindor was able to easily win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was able to cast his first real Patronus during the match. Too bad, it wasn't against an actual Dementor. Instead, it was sent at Draco’s henchmen dressed as Dementors.

After the game, life became far less fun, exams here once again the students of Hogwarts. Percy, who was sitting his N.E.W.T.s, the highest level of certification the school offered and was likely to snap if someone in the common room so much as breathed too loudly. The only person who may have been more high strung was Hermione. She could be found up late at night working on complicated Ruins translations or diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects.

Harry, now free of Quidditch practice, was able to start helping Neville with their research in the defense of Buckbeak. The trail would be on the last day of exams. The trio was desperately trying to find anything that might save the hippogriff's life. So far, they weren't having much luck. Hagrid was trying to give the animal as nice of a time as he could. Harry had managed to make through all of his exams so far with varying degrees of success. His tea kettle turned turtle for Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration exam may have been a bit off, but it didn't still have a spout for a tail like Ron, or willow pattern shell like Dean. Professor Lupin's exam had been the easiest for Harry.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor had set up a bit of an obstacle course that each student, in turn, had to face. Harry had cruised through with ease. Neville did well with a Boggart, hinkypunks, and red caps, but got tripped up and caught by the grindylow. Hermione went to pieces at the Boggart. Professor Lupin had to spend several minutes reassuring her that it was all fine. Ron wasn't so kind; he made fun of her all through lunch, for her Boggart being Professor McGonagall telling her she failed everything.

Harry and Neville's last exam was Divination while Hermione went to sit hers for Arithmancy. Professor Trelawney called each person into the tower classroom in turn. They would have to tell her a fortune using one of the methods they had studied over the last year. Harry had never been able to see anything in any of the methods they had studied so it made little difference to him.

Neville was one of the first to be called. He disappeared up into the stuffy room for only ten minutes before returning. He refused to tell anybody about it. Professor Trelawney said if he did, he would have a terrible accident. Harry cared a great deal for his friend, but even he could guess that. The boy was one of the clumsiest people Harry had ever met. The crowd on the landing whittled down until it was only Harry left sitting there.

"Harry Potter," Trelawney's ethereal voice called.
Harry climbed the stairs into the attic room. It was sweltering hot, the air heavy was strange perfumes. A large crystal ball sat in the center of a little table covered in lace doilies. Harry came and sat across the table from his professor.

"You will tell me what you see in the crystal ball," she instructed.

Harry stared in vain at the glittering orb, but as always, saw only fog.

"What do you see?"

Harry cast his mind around for anything to say. The only thing that came to mind was Hagrid and Buckbeak's appeal. It was supposed to be starting any time now.

"I see Buckbeak," Harry said.

"Ahh... You must be seeing the fate of Hagrid's poor creature on trial today."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"What more do you see?"

"Hagrid's crying," Harry continued.

"And what of the animal? A bloody ax perhaps, pools of blood and feathers?"

Harry shook his head, "No... He's flying away."

"Ah well, a good attempt Mr. Potter. That will be all," she said making a few last marks on Harry's paper.

Harry shrugged and collected his bags.

"HE RETURNS THIS NIGHT," Trelawney said. This wasn't her usual voice, It was deeper and like it was coming from a great distance.

"What was that professor," Harry said turning back to the woman.

Professor Trelawney sat rigged in her chair, the jeweled glasses that always made her eyes look like a great big bug sat crooked on her face.

"HE WILL RETURN AGAIN THIS NIGHT...THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANT'S AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT... BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT... WILL SET OUT... TO REJOIN... HIS MASTER..." Trelawney said before her head fell forward.

"Who will return tonight?" Harry asked.

"What was that dear? I must have drifted off," Trelawney said looking to Harry.

"Nevermind," Harry grumbled the words of that far off voice still stuck in his head. He rushed downstairs to tell Neville and Hermione what he just heard, but it was driven from his mind in the moments after reuniting with his friends. They wanted to relax the good weather and end of exams. They wouldn't know their results for a week or so and Hagrid was busy with Buckbeak's case.
They weren't the only ones wanting to hear about Buckbeak's fate. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle sat on the steps of the castle talking and laughing as the trio came down the stairs.

"Off to see the oaf?" Malfoy drawled. "I bet his great chicken doesn't have much longer."

"Why you foul, loathsome, little cockroach," Hermione said before punching Draco hard in the lower jaw.

"You'll pay for that, Mudblood," Draco said, a hand flying up to his injured jaw.

Hermione pulled her fist back again, but Draco was already heading into the castle. She turned headed in the opposite direction, down the lawn towards the lake.

"That was brilliant," Harry said, jogging to catch up with the girl.

"It felt really good," Hermione admitted running a hand over her sore knuckles.

"He's going to tell Professor Snape," Neville warned.

"No," Harry said with a chuckle, "He wouldn't want to admit he just got hit by a girl."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't care," Hermione said, flopping down gracelessly onto the lawn under a large oak tree.

The three of them spent the time until dinner relaxing under the tree. Harry all but forgot about Trelawney's prediction. They were even able to set their worry about Hagrid aside for a few hours, that was until they reached the castle steps.

There stood the Minister of Magic in his signature lime-green bowler hat and pinstriped cloak. Next to him was a thick, cruel looking man, a large ax hung from his hip. They were accompanied too, by a very old and frail looking wizard. The Minister informed Harry they were there for Buckbeak's trial and execution.

"I can't believe they've already made up their minds," Hermione said taking a helping of chicken from the serving trays.

"Maybe they haven't," Neville offered disingenuously, "maybe they just want to be prepared.

"I wouldn't count on it," Harry said picking at his mashed potatoes.

"We should go see him," Neville said.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"We can go after dinner," Hermione added.

"But how?" Neville asked, "We're not supposed to be outside after dark."

"Harry, where did you leave your cloak?" Hermione asked.

"In the tunnel to Hogsmeade. If Professor Snape sees me anywhere near there, he'll skin me alive," Harry said shaking his head. "I don't know how I managed to get out of his office as it is."

"You can't but he wouldn't ever expect me," Hermione said with a slightly mischievous look.

Harry and Neville grinned. They really had been a bad influence on her. The boys waited for
Hermione by the Great Hall as she disappeared upstairs. Harry could feel Professor Snape's eyes on him. He tried to look as innocent as possible.

Hermione came back a little while later her book bag stuffed with the cloak. They walked out to a small room off the hall and waited for there to be a break. After they hadn't heard anybody for a while they threw the cloak over all three of them. It was harder to do now than in first year. They had to go slow so nobody could see their feet. There was some loud shuffling as Hagrid came to the door of his hut. They could hear him yelling at Fang to get back. Finally, the door opened. From the look on his face, they could tell the trail hadn't gone well.

“Oh it’s yeh lot,” Hagrid said. “Yeh shouldn’ta come,” Hagrid said sadly.

“We couldn’t let you be alone,” Hermione said.

Hagrid stepped aside to let them in. “I wouldn’ta been alone. Dumbledore says he’ll come down ter be with me.” Hagrid whipped a tear away from his face, “Great man, Dumbledore.”


“He’s tied up outside,” Hagrid said motioning with one huge hand. “I thought he should get ter see one last sunset.” He broke down in uncontrollable sobs.

“How about some tea?” Hermione asked.

Harry cocked his head at his friend.

“Your aunt doesn’t make tea when someone is upset?” She asked.

“Gran does,” Neville said, “I’ll make it.” He hopped up and placed the huge copper kettle on the fire to boil.

Hermione collected mugs and placed them on the table.

Neville went through the cabinets looking for tea leaves and sugar. “Hagrid, where’s the milk?”

“Second cupboard,” Hagrid choked out mid-sob.

Neville opened the indicated cupboard and pulled down a half-empty bottle of milk. But dropped it when something moved in the back of the cupboard.

“What’s up Neville?” Harry asked standing up.

"Something moved in the cupboard," Neville said pulling out a second bottle and placed it on the counter. He grabbed the creature that startled him so badly by the tail. "It was just a rat." Neville carried the rat over for closer inspection.

The rat tried his best to squirm out of Neville's hands. He scratched and the hands holding him until Neville only had him but the tail. Harry grabbed a glass bowl from the draining board Neville set the terrified rat down as Harry slammed the bowl down over the top of him.

Harry after a moment of inspection, stunned said, "That's not just any rat, that's Scabbers."

"What!" Hermione demanded.
"Look," Harry said pointing to the missing front toe. "How many rats are missing that toe, or are that bald."

She wasn't as familiar with Ron's rat, but she had to agree, this was Scabbers. "I told him Crookshanks didn't eat his stupid rat."

There were voices outside.

"That's them," Hagrid realized. "Out the back. I don't want yer in trouble cause oh me."

"Get Scabbers," Harry urged as he picked up the cloak. "We'll take him back to Ron."

Neville grabbed the rat with great difficulty. He couldn't get the rat to go in his pocket and stay. Hagrid opened the back door and the three carefully made their way into the garden. Buckbeak turned his great orange eyes in their direction, but couldn't see them. That didn't stop him from scratching the ground nervously, his six inch long talons making deep ruts in the soil.

"What if we let him go?" Harry asked.

"They'll think Hagrid did it," Hermione whispered back.

Neville was still fighting to keep hold of the rat. It squeaked and scratched.

"Stop it," Neville moaned. "Owwww!" Neville dropped the rat and let put a painfully cry as the crossed the grounds.

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

"He bit me," Neville said before throwing off the cloak chasing after the rodent. "Scabbers, stop," Neville cried.

Neville didn't see it as he scanned the grass, the bear-sized dog that tackled him as he finally recaptured Ron's wayward pet. Neville screamed at the sight of fierce jaws snarled in his face. He unsuccessfully tried to roll away, but the beast was too big. It sunk its jaws into Neville's leg and dragged him off and under a tree.

"Neville," Hermione moaned.

Harry ran forward but was hit by a six-inch wide limb. Of course, the dog had gone into the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. Branch after branch rained blows on the pair of teens as they tried to rescue their friend. Their rescue came in an unexpected form, a smash-faced, bandy-legged orange cat, Crookshanks. The cat placed a paw on a knot on the tree and the branches stopped their vicious attack.

"Oh, thank you, Crookshanks," Hermione said but the cat was gone.

They could just make out the tip of his bottlebrush tail disappearing under the now calm tree. Harry and Hermione followed the cat down the low tunnel, carefully ducking to avoid roots coming down through the low ceiling, occasionally bumping their heads on roots, or stumbling over stones in their ways.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry replied, "but I think I have an idea of where this goes."

"How did Crookshanks know how to stop the tree?" Hermione asked.
“I don’t know, but he seems to know that dog.”

Through the silence, they walked as fast as they could on the uneven surface, in a crouched position. The tunnel seemed to last forever. They just hoped their friend would be okay when found him. The earth sloped gently upward near the end leading to a small set of wooden stairs. They climbed them hoping the boards didn’t creak as they made their way up.

The steps lead into a dusty room, broken furniture surrounded them. Hermione let out a sudden gasp, realizing where they were. Harry looked back confused.

“We’re in the Shrieking Shack,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?” Harry asked back.

Hermione nodded vigorously.

“Neville’s this way,” he said spotting the trail in the thick dust.

It led upstairs. They were not as lucky this time, as they mounted their way up. A stair about halfway up, creaking loudly, disturbing the silence of the shack. Neville lay on a broken four poster bed, his leg bleeding. His round face was pale and sweaty in a mixture of pain and fear.

“Where’s the dog?” Harry demanded.

“Not a dog,” Neville said shakily, confusing Harry further.

“What do you mean not a dog?”

Neville pointed a shaking finger at opposite side of the room; there stood the deranged Sirius Black, a wicked grin spread across his manic face. Hermione screamed.

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“Expelliarmus!” The adult wizard yelled, denying Harry and Hermione their wands.

Harry lunged at the wizard, all thoughts of doing magic, or that this was a full-grown man and he was a short, skinny, thirteen-year-old, forgotten in his anger. He jumped at the man his fists flying without a care. Black simply laughed. He didn’t seem to notice that he was being punched repeatedly by this scrawny teenager as they lay tousling on the dirty floor.

“Harry,” Hermione screamed, distressed by her friend’s reckless actions.

Black threw the boy off eventually, seeming none the worse for wear.

“You killed my parents,” Harry screamed at the madman.

“Harry,” Hermione exclaimed again.

“You’re just like your father.” Sirius said with another laugh, “Just like James.”

“Don’t talk about my parents. You killed them.” Harry exclaimed again.
“I didn’t, but I might as well have. It was Peter Pettigrew. He’ll pay for it tonight.”

“What! You’re mad! Pettigrew is dead! You killed him!” Harry yelled again.

“He’s not,” Sirius said back. “He’s right here, in this very room.”

“He’s completely mad,” Neville said from his place on the bed.

“No. No, I’m not,” Sirius insisted. “Peter’s been here all this time.”

There was another creak as someone else came up the stairs. The quartet was joined by another familiar face, Remus Lupin.

“I knew it,” Hermione exclaimed as the three children watched the two men embrace.

“What?” Harry demanded, spinning around to his angered friend.

“I knew it. I knew he’s been helping him. He has to have been.”

“I have not, Hermione,” Lupin said breaking the embrace with the other wizard.

“You have to have been,” Hermione insisted.

“No. No, I don’t. Honestly, I have not been helping Sirius.” Lupin

“Don’t trust anything he says,” Hermione instructed the boys. “Don’t trust him. He’s a werewolf.” Anger clear in her shaking voice.

“Not at all up to your usual standards,” Lupin said softly. “I have not been helping Sirius. Here. Take your wands back,” Lupin said throwing back the appropriate to each of the teens in turn, before setting his own aside. “I have not been helping Sirius. But I am a werewolf. How long have you known?”

“Since Professor Snape set the essay,” Hermione said her anger still clear.

“He’ll be happy to hear that. It is of course why he set the assignment,” Lupin said with shaking his head.

“Snape?” Black asked, huskily to Lupin.

“He’s here,” Lupin confirmed. “He’s teaching Potions.”

Black out a disapproving scoff.

“If you haven’t been helping him, how’s he been getting into the castle,” Hermione asked. “And…”

“He killed my parents,” Harry shouted over his teacher.

“Harry, he didn’t,” Lupin said once more, “Peter Pettigrew did. We can show you.”

“It’s all mad,” Neville muttered.

“He admitted it,” Harry said ignoring Neville’s comments. “He said he killed my parents.”

“No,” Black growled, “I said ‘I had good as done.’”

“They died because of him,” Harry said pointing at the escaped convict.
“Yes,” Black agreed, his face falling losing its manic grin for the first time.

“See,” Harry said pointing at the wizard. “He killed them.”

“No,” Lupin insisted yet again. “Neville, let me see the rat.

“Huh?” Neville said trying to keep hold of the still panicked rodent.

Lupin let out a tired sigh, “Harry, there is a great deal to explain. It will all be much easier once you can see properly.”

“Let’s just kill him,” Black snapped.

“No, Sirius,” Lupin said turning back to his friend. “Harry deserves to know the truth, all the of truth.”

Black let out a frustrated growl. “I’ve waited twelve years. I want to commit the murder I was convicted of.”

“Sirius, we owe him an explanation,” Lupin reminded him.

“Fine,” Black conceded with another angry huff, “Make it quick.”

“Sirius, you’ll have to explain some of it. I don’t know the whole story, but it all starts back at Hogwarts.”

“Remus,” Black grumbled.

“They need to understand, that means starting at the beginning.”

“Fine,” Sirius said sinking down onto the bed, sitting as far away from Neville as possible, making sure not to disturb the boy’s injured leg. Crookshanks happily hopped into the man’s lap, purring loudly as the man stroked behind his tufted orange ears.

“Hermione is correct, I am a werewolf. That’s where this story begins.” Lupin began. “I was bitten as a small boy. My family feared I would never be able to attend Hogwarts given my condition.

“My family’s fears were alleviated one afternoon with a visit from Professor Dumbledore. He promised that I would be able to attend school, like any other normal boy my age. It was a dream I never thought I would be able to achieve. But something I always wished to do.

“I boarded the train as an eleven-year-old boy and was Sorted into Gryffindor. There I made my first friends, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black, and your dad,” Remus said gesturing to the boy, “James Potter. Now like you Hermione, they couldn’t help noticing how I kept disappearing. I made excuses, my mother was ill and I had to go visit, that I was sick. They were some of the most talents youth of our generation.

“Eventually they figured out what was wrong with me. They confronted me, they wanted to know why I failed to confide in them. How could I have admitted I was a monster? Instead of ridiculing me, abandoning me, they did something very different.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“They became Animagi.” Lupin said with a smile, “That was in the days before the Wolfsbane Potion, without it I become a vicious beast, I used to bite and scratch myself since I had no people to attack. I couldn’t be around people but I could be around other animals.
“It took them the better four years to figure out how to do it. By fifth year all three were able to transform successfully. Sirius became the great black dog, Peter a rat…”

“What was my dad?” Harry asked excitedly.

“Hurry it up,” Black barked watching the squirming rat.

There was another creak of the stairs.

“This place is haunted. Gran always said it was haunted,” Neville said looking at the door toward the stairs.

“Augusta isn’t always right,” Lupin said with a soft chuckle.

“I wouldn’t tell her that,” Neville said uneasily.

“I wouldn’t either,” Lupin agreed. “But the screams that people used to hear weren’t violent ghosts, they were me. It was me attacking myself since I had no other source of prey. That was before my friends were able to join me. Now in our fifth year, once they were able to complete their transformations they joined me here in the Shrieking Shack. Being in their presence calmed my mind.

“It wasn’t long before we out the beast’s energy to use. We explored the castle and grounds on the full moon. I’m certain no one has come to know Hogwarts as well as the four of us. We used this knowledge to create the Marauder’s Map. We even signed it with our nicknames. I was Moony, Sirius was Padfoot, Peter was Wormtail…”

“My dad was Prongs,” Harry finished.

“Yes,” Black and Lupin agreed. “After graduation, we all joined the Order of the Phoenix, fighting against Voldemort. But we were betrayed.”

“By him,” Harry said once more pointing at Black.

Snape lifted the cloak, revealing himself to the ensemble.

“Severus,” Lupin said surprised. “How did you know we were here?”

“I came to bring you your potion this evening when I saw you left your map open on your desk. I saw you rushing to join Potter. And now I have proof for what I have been saying. I repeatedly told Dumbledore you couldn’t be trusted.”

“Same as always, Snivellus. Has all the facts and draws the wrong conclusion,” Black goaded.

“Why don’t you go back to your dungeon and play with your chemistry set?”

“Sir,” Harry said stepping closer to the Potions Master. “I want to hear what they have to say.”

“They’re lying, Potter. They’re both mad. Pettigrew is dead.” Snape said dismissing him.

“Oh yes, you would know,” Black needled. “You were the one kissing Voldemort’s boots, one of his little Death Eaters.”

Harry, Hermione, and Neville gasped in surprise. They had heard a few times that Neville’s gran didn’t trust Snape, but they always thought it was only a rumor Snape was a Death Eater. This was the first time they had ever heard someone make the accusation directly.
“Yes, like your dear little brother,” Snape snapped back. “How did it work out for poor little Regulus?”

Black lunged toward Snape but Harry jumped between them.

“This scum...” Black began.

“I’m not the one that betrayed Lily and Potter,” Snape hissed.

“Neither did I,” Black replied.

“Then who did?” Snape demanded.

“It was Peter,” Black told them.

“Sirius, you’ll have to explain. Even I don’t understand this part.”

“Lily and James wanted to make me Secret Keeper,” Sirius reminded them. “I was to go into hiding as well. But at the last minute, I begged Lily and James to pick someone else. I begged them to make Peter the Secret-Keeper instead. I never thought he would betray them. Who would ever suspect poor, talentless Peter? Then I heard of the attacks.”

“And you killed Pettigrew the day after the Potters were killed,” Snape continued.

“I wanted to,” Black admitted. “I tried, but he got away from me. Not before he started yelling for the whole street to hear how I betrayed Lily and James. He blew the street half apart. He must have transformed.”

“They found parts of him,” Snape countered.

“A finger, Snape. Look at the rat, it’s missing a toe,” Sirius pointed out.

The Potion Master stepped closer to Neville. “Let me see the rat, boy.”

Remus said with an exasperated sigh, “Here Neville, hand me that rat.”

Neville did so reluctantly. It squirmed and fought even harder in the werewolf’s hands, clearly distressed. “If the rat is who we think it is, this won’t hurt him. If he’s not, if he’s not just Scabbers, this spell will show us who he truly is. Severus, if you would be so kind as to help me.”

Snape gave a terse nod.

“On the count of three?” Lupin purposed to receive another nod. “One… Two… Three…”

The teens watched spellbound as the professors cast their charm. At first, it didn’t seem to do anything, then suddenly, the rat’s small body began to expand. The body lengthened and stretched wider, the features still rodent-like, but clearly a human face and body.

“It’s true,” Snape said stunned.

“What you don’t know who else are under those robes? Too busy kissing Voldemort’s boots?” Sirius said to Snape.

Snape glared at Black in response.

“Remus… Sirius… my old friends…” Pettigrew stammered finally gather enough wits to speak.
“Shut up,” Black snapped.

Pettigrew flinched away from the convict.

“Hello Peter,” Lupin said more civilly than Harry could have managed.

“Remus…” Pettigrew stammered. “You have to protect me. Sirius… he wants to kill me…”

“And I will,” Black promised.

Lupin glared at his friend, “That’s not going to help, Sirius.”

Black only shrugged in response.

“So good of you to join us, Peter. Sirius won’t hurt you…yet. We all have some questions we would like to have answered before that happens,” Lupin said lightly.

Pettigrew whimpered in fear.

“Was that really the best thing for you to say, Lupin?” Snape asked ignoring the cowering man in the corner.

“Really Severus?” Lupin asked frowning. “I thought you were a fan of the direct approach?”

“When dealing with misbehaving students perhaps. When trying to retrieve information from traitors and cowards, I find a more subtle approach tends to work better.” Snape said coolly.

“Have a lot of experience with that, Snivellus?” Black said glaring at the Potions Master once again.

“Professor,” Hermione asked nervously.

Snape and Lupin both looked at the girl expectantly.

“Well, this man, Peter, if he wanted to hurt Harry, why hasn’t he done it over the last three years. He’s been sleeping in Harry’s dormitory the whole time. Harry’s even spent time at the Weasleys during the summer. He could have acted at any time.”


“He’s a coward,” growled Black.

“Sirius,” Lupin chided.

“It’s the truth, Remus. The little traitor didn’t come forward because he wasn’t going to stick his neck out. Why do you think he found a wizard family to live with for the last twelve years? So he could make a move if he heard anything about his little Death Eater buddies.”

“Not true,” Pettigrew mumbled.

“Not true,” Black growled, “Who else could it have been? You were the Secret Keeper! You turned Lily and James over to Voldemort! For what?”

“What else could I do,” Pettigrew moaned. “He would have killed me.”

“Then you should have died! Like James and Lily would have done for us.” Black snapped.
Remus sighed, “He’s right, Peter. You should have realized, if Voldemort didn’t kill you, we would.”

In an awkward silent exchange, Snape handed his wand to the escaped convict.

“NOOOOO!!!!,” Pettigrew pleaded.

Remus raised his wand, Black held Snape’s black wand in his hand, testing the feel of it.

“Wait!” Harry said stepping forward.

“Harry, this scum is the reason you don’t have parents,” Black reminded him.

“I know,” Harry said looking at the trembling coward. “But I figure my dad wouldn’t want his two best friends to become killers for this rat.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Pettigrew said throwing himself at Harry.

Black kicked him back. “Don’t you dare touch that boy!”

“Potter has a point,” Snape said speaking up once more. “Killing Pettigrew, though I am sure would feel good, but would accomplish little in terms of the Ministry. I doubt you wish to spend the rest of your life on the run, Black.”

“We should take him to the castle,” Hermione said. “They can’t continue to hold Mr. Black for a murder if they have the victim.”

“My point exactly Miss. Granger,” Snape said smoothly.

“Five points to Gryffindor,” Lupin joked, only to receive a glare from Snape.

Lupin grinned shyly, “It’s a reflex.”

Snape rolled his eyes. Harry and his fellow students watched the exchange bemused. They had never seen either of their professors behave in such a manner.

“We need to get Peter back to the castle,” Lupin observed.

“Incarcerous,” Snape said lazily, thick ropes bound and gagged Pettigrew in an instant.

“Peter,” Lupin said his words deadly serious, “If you try to escape this time, we will kill you. That okay, Harry?” The boy in question nodded before the werewolf turned to the other boy. “Neville, I’m not as good as healing spells as Madam Pomfrey, I’ll bind until we can get to see her,” Lupin said coming inspect the boy still laying on the bed.

“Okay,” Neville said as he watched bandages wrap themselves tightly around his injured leg. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” Black said giving Neville a hand up to his feet. “I was going for the rat.”

“It’s okay,” Neville said with a shrug, “I’ve been hurt a lot worse than that.”

“Remus said your grandmother’s name is Augusta. That wouldn’t be Augusta Longbottom would it?” Black asked.

“Yeah, she is. Do you know her?” Neville asked standing a bit unsteadily.
“Only a little, I knew your dad. He was a couple years ahead of us at Hogwarts. He put me and James in detention more times than I care to remember,” Black said with a soft chuckle. “I was sorry to hear about what happened to Frank and Alice. That is a fate worse than death.”

“Get moving Black, we haven’t got all night,” Snape prodded.

“Come on,” Black said helping Neville lean on him as they made their way out the door. Neville almost tripped as Crookshanks came around in front of them on the stairs. They were followed by Harry and Hermione and Snape. At the end of the group came Lupin hovering the still bound Pettigrew. They made their way down the tunnel Sirius fell back so he was just ahead of Harry.

“Harry, I didn’t get a chance to say this before, but before your parents died they named me your guardian. Now that my name will be cleared, you could come and live with me.” Black said too afraid to look the boy in the eyes.

“Come and live with you?” Harry asked shocked.

“I can understand if you don’t want to leave your aunt and uncle’s…” Black began.

“You mean leave the Dursleys?” Harry said excitedly. “Do you have a house? When can I move in?”

“You want to come?” Black asked.

“Of course,” Harry agreed.

“You can come as soon as the term ends then,” Black said the grin on his face was unrecognizable compared to the manic expression that adorned his face before.

“Great,” Harry said, the hope of change overwhelming him.

They completed the crawl down the tunnel in silence. Harry desperately tried to contain his excitement. His thoughts raced about what leaving the Dursleys would be like. He would never have to deal with Dudley again. Aunt Petunia couldn’t force him to do all the chores. Uncle Vernon wouldn’t always yell at him to get a haircut. Better than all of that though, it would be wonderful to have a real place to call home. A place where he could go and people would actually look forward to his company, something he had never had before.

The strange line of people made their way out of the tunnel. It was full dark now it would have been hard to navigate the grounds if it were not for the moonlight breaking through the clouds. The moon was full!

Lupin stopped in his tracks his body going rigid.

“He didn’t take his potion,” Hermione whispered.

“Get back,” Snape ordered. He pushed the children behind him. Pettigrew fell to the ground as Snape moved to cast whatever spell they might need. Black changed into the great black dog as Lupin’s features began to lengthen and contort. His skin erupted into a thick coat of brown fur. Neville tried to back away from the wolf but tripped over the lump that was Pettigrew.

“Professor,” Neville cried weakly.

Pettigrew must have transformed to escape his bonds because he now stood behind Neville, the
boy’s own wand pointed at his throat. Snape looked from the menacing werewolf to the boy held at wand point.

“Potter, Granger, be prepared to run,” Snape said his voice calm as ever.

Harry and Hermione nodded silently. Harry pulled Hermione back with him as he slowly backed away as the werewolf padded closer, his sharp teeth exposed, snarling. He moved closer but was tackled by Black’s great black dog form. The two began to fight as Snape cast his first spell at Pettigrew. The man successfully used Neville as a shield. Pettigrew threw the dead weight of the now unconscious boy to the ground.

The dog and wolf continued to wrestle on the ground biting and scratching. They broke apart when a spell cast by Pettigrew grazed them. The wolf ran off to the woods, Snape lay on the ground a wound to his head, not from a spell, but tripping over the uneven surface. Pettigrew, disarmed at least, had transformed once more and disappeared into the grounds. Then the cold came.

“Oh no,” Harry breathed, “It’s Dementors. Sirius run!”

The dog ran off toward the lake, Harry left Hermione left to look after Professor Snape and Neville. He ran after the dog finding him back huddled in his human form again, sobbing on the lake shore. The Dementors began to swarm. Sirius sobbed Harry as they approached. Harry fought back the screaming. Sirius was going to be okay. He was going to be fine, Harry was going to live with him. There was the high cold laugh. “Please, not Harry.” Harry shook his head trying to clear it. “Expecto… Expecto… Expecto Patronum…” He shook his head again, “Expecto Patronum!” This time something emerged from his wand, a small shapeless thing. The Dementor pushed it away without a second thought. It picked Harry up with one hand, as if he weighed no more than a feather, with the other it lowered its hood. The face like its hand was dark, rotten looking flesh. There was no proper mouth, just a gaping hole. Harry would have screamed, but he didn’t have the strength.

A brilliant light came charging at Harry, the Dementor let him go. He hit the ground hard. There it was, a brilliant silver doe chasing all of the Dementors away. In its silver light, Harry could make just make out another person across the lake shore. But it was impossible, it couldn’t be. His dad was dead, James Potter couldn’t be standing by the lake. Harry lifted his head to look again, then everything went black…

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“That can’t be Dumbledore,” a weary voice said.

“I assure you it is true, Minister,” Dumbledore said.

Harry lifted his groggy head. He reached out a hand feeling for his glasses, with them on he could make out the familiar surroundings of the Hospital Wing. Hermione lay in the bed across from Harry, Neville was still unconscious in the bed next to her. He didn’t see Sirius, or Professor Snape anywhere though.

“I was there, Minister. What the Headmaster says occurred did.” Harry heard locating the voices at the far end of the ward.

“Ahhh, you’re awake,” Madam Pomfrey said bustling around Harry’s bed. She placed a cool hand
on his cold and clammy forehead, looking into his eyes.

“I need to speak with Professor Dumbledore,” Harry said, but he couldn’t continue as the nurse stuck a thermometer in his mouth.

“But Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione protested getting the same treatment now.

“Dumbledore, they’re children,” Fudge complained. “They need their rest.”

“Yes,” Madam Pomfrey agreed as she carried over the biggest block of chocolate Harry had ever seen. She took a small hammer and chisel and started breaking off bits for her patients.

“Madam Pomfrey, I must insist on having a word with Miss. Granger and Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said watching as the matron forced huge chunks of chocolate on Harry and Hermione.

“Sirius didn’t do it,” Harry said around a mouthful of the sweet.

“Pettigrew was there in Shrieking Shack,” Hermione insisted.

Dumbledore held up his hand to silence them. “You must listen, the Minister has Sirius in the Charms classroom, on the third floor the seventh from the right. The Minister has summoned the Dementors are coming to perform the Kiss. There isn’t enough time. Do you understand Miss Granger,” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione was already up and out of bed and pulling something from under her robes, “Yes sir.”

“You know the laws, Miss. Granger. If you do this right, you can save more than one life tonight. I’m going to lock you in. It’s ten minutes to midnight. Miss. Granger, three turns should do it,” Dumbledore said before shutting the door.

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione said pulling him out of bed.

“Hermione, what’s going on? What did he mean three turns,” Harry demanded confusedly as Hermione threw a gold chain over his head. “What’s that?” He said raising a hand to the charm that Hermione was carefully spinning. She smacked him away.

Harry stood by fascinated as the world around them seemed to play in reverse. “What just happened?”

“We went back in time,” Hermione said flatly. “We’re three hours in the past, where were we then?”

Harry frowned.

“Come on, Harry, where were we?”

“I don’t know, heading down to Hagrid’s?” Harry said, shrugging.

Hermione grabbed his wrist, “We need to get back down there, but we can’t be seen.”

“Uh okay,” Harry said following Hermione out of the Hospital Wing and down the stairs.

Hermione held him back as they reached the entrance hall, “Wait.” There was the sound of slowly shifting feet. “Yes, that’s us leaving under the Invisibility Cloak.” She waited until the door closed once more. “Let’s go now.”
“What’s going on?” Harry demanded.

“We’re back in time, but I don’t understand why now. Two lives, what did Professor Dumbledore mean?” Hermione asked. “We were going down to Hagrid’s…”

“Buckbeak,” Harry said. “We were going down to visit Hagrid before they killed Buckbeak. Do you think he wants us to save Buckbeak?”

Hermione smacked her forehead, “Of course.”

The pair ran down the grounds, instead of crossing straight down the lawn like they did before they crossed by the greenhouses and on the edge of the forest. The two were finally down to the hut.

“Harry,” Hermione said taking a seat in the woods behind the cabin. Harry looked back to his friend. “I don’t know how we’re supposed to do this?”

“We untie Buckbeak and then use him to free Sirius and they escape together,” Harry said finally.

“I know that,” Hermione sighed, “but Harry, there’s all sorts of history filled with wizards who went back in time and tried to change things. Sometimes they killed their future selves because they didn’t understand what was happening.”

“We’ll be careful, Hermione,” Harry promised. “We need to untie Buckbeak.”

“Not yet, we have to wait until the Ministry officials see him, or they’ll think Hagrid let him go.” The two waited anxiously for the time to pass. The backdoor opened and Buckbeak tossed his head sensing the presence of the three under the cloak. There were voices in the cabin. They saw the ancient wizard look out to see that Buckbeak was tied up outside.

“Now,” Harry said. He carefully repeated all the steps Hagrid taught them on how to handle the hippogriff. When the creature sunk to his knees he was able to get him untied. Harry lead him into the woods. Dumbledore and the Ministry officials came out to find nothing. The Minister wanted to organize the search of the grounds, but Dumbledore pointed out that it would be pointless with an animal that can fly.

Harry and Hermione moved closer to the tunnel so they can see when they emerged hours later. They sat there in uncomfortable silence for long moments before Harry finally broke it.

“Hermione,” Harry said uneasily.

“What Harry,” she said as Buckbeak dug at the ground looking for worms.

“I know this is impossible, but I think I saw my dad tonight,” Harry said not looking at his friend.

“Harry, I’m sorry...But Harry, your dad is dead.” Hermione said sadly.

“I know,” Harry said. “But I saw him across the lake when those Dementors were all around us he was across the lake from us. He’s the one that made them all go away.”

“Harry…” Hermione said softly.

Harry sighed, “Fine, I know.”

The silence returned as Harry gave up arguing with Hermione. They had to move again when the wolf would have come running right at them. Harry slipped away when they moved, leaving Hermione with Buckbeak. He ran to the lake trying, waiting to see his dad. The Dementors were
swarming. He was going to be Kissed. Then it hit him, he was the one that cast the spell.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry cried as the silver stag erupted from his wand chasing all the Dementors away.

“Oh my! What did you do Harry!” Hermione yelled running toward Harry as she dragged a reluctant Buckbeak behind her.

“It’s fine, Hermione.” He reassured her. “It was me, not my dad. I knew I could do it this time since I already did it.”

The two watched as Professor Dumbledore came back up the grounds from Hagrid’s. He conjured stretchers and carried the four unconscious people up to the castle Hermione following timidly behind him. They saw a silver bird, possibly a Patronus soaring over the grounds and down toward the village. They watched as Fudge returned to the castle several minutes later. We need to get moving.”

“Okay,” Harry said climbing aboard the back of the hippogriff. He put his hand out down for Hermione to climb on behind him. Harry put his heels and Buckbeak took off.

“I really don’t like this,” Hermione said squeezing tightly around Harry’s middle.

“I know,” Harry said trying to count windows. They stopped in front of the right window, Buckbeak raising and lowering by several feet to the beating of his great wings. Hermione removed her wand and magically unlocked the window.

“What’s going on?” Sirius asked.

“Get on,” Harry encouraged.

The three of them flew up to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Harry and Hermione slid off the hippogriff’s back. “We have ten minutes, Harry.”

Harry nodded.

“Hermione,” Sirius said in a low voice, “You really are the cleverest witch of your age.”

Hermione smiled shyly.

“Harry, you really are your father’s son,” Sirius said pulling the boy into a hug. “We’ll see each other again. Don’t worry.”

Harry nodded.

“Harry, we’ve got to go,” Hermione said tugging on Harry’s sleeve. Harry watched his godfather flew off on the back of the fugitive hippogriff. They arrived at the doors to the Hospital Wing breathless just as Dumbledore was locking them.

“Did you do it?” Dumbledore asked.

“Sirius just left on Buckbeak,” Harry said.

Dumbledore listened to the door for a moment, “Yes, I think you’ve gone.” He opened the door again, letting Harry and Hermione returned to their beds.

They slipped under the covers and didn’t care when an annoyed rather Madam Pomfrey shoveled
The Minister of Magic came down a little while later to inform Harry he was very sorry that Black had somehow managed to escape. He also informed Harry that Dumbledore would no longer allow the Dementors to be stationed around the school. The Minister hoped Harry didn’t blame him for any of these mistakes. Harry just shrugged it off.

Madam Pomfrey released the three of them from the Hospital Wing the next day after lunch. They headed out to the grounds to enjoy the early summer weather.

“Hello Hagrid,” Harry said as the giant’s shadow fell over the three as they sat on the lake shore, beside the oak tree they rest under the day before.

“Yeh heard abou’ Buckbeak?” Hagrid said, his grin barely contained the grin on his scruffy face.

“No,” Harry said trying to sound innocent.

“He escaped,” Hagrid said proudly. “I always knew he was a clear hippogriff. He escaped under the Ministry’s nose. He was there one minute and gone before McNair could chop his head off.”

“Wow,” Hermione said trying to feign surprise. “How could he have done that?”

“I dunno, he mustn’ta tied him up well enough,” Hagrid said. “I was just going to take this up to Professor Lupin before he leaves.”

“Where’s he going?” Harry asked sitting up.

“Dunno, but he resigned this mornin’ didn’t he?” Hagrid said with a shrug.

“What!” All three of the Gryffindors exclaimed.

“He gave his letter to Professor Dumbledore this mornin’. O’ course he didn’t have much choice with not takin’ his potion last night. Didn’ want to put the students in more danger,” Hagrid said, but then stopped. “I shouldn’ta said that. I shouldn’ta said that.”

“When’s he leaving?” Harry asked.

“Right soon, I expect.”

“I’m going to go up and see him,” Harry said getting to his feet.

“Do you want us to come?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

“Okay,” Neville said, “we’ll be here when you’re done.”

“Thanks, guy,” Harry said sprinting off to the castle.

“Hello Harry,” Lupin greeted him a few moments later, not even looking at the door as Harry entered.

“How did you…” Harry began.

“I saw you coming,” Lupin said gesturing to the map laid open on his desk.

“Right,” Harry acknowledged with a sheepish grin. “Hagrid said you’re leaving.”
“Yes,” Lupin said.

“Why you’re the best Defense professor we’ve ever had,” Harry argued.

Lupin shook his head. “I put you all in danger last night. We were incredibly lucky that none of you were hurt or worse last night. No, I can’t put you in that sort of danger again.”

Harry shook his head.

“How about you tell me about your Patronus?” Lupin said trying to raise the boy’s spirits.

“Dumbledore?” Harry asked.

“Who else?” Lupin said.

Harry recounted the entire encounter from the time Remus ran into the woods. Harry described the doe Patronus in great detail.

“It’s interesting. James was always a stag when he transformed, his Patronus as well.” Lupin said with a sad smile. “It was your mother’s Patronus that was a doe.”

“Lupin, the headmaster wishes you to know your carriage is here,” Snape said coming into the room.

“Thank you, Severus,” Lupin said with a nod. He placed one last thing in his case before closing the lid on the worn leather case. He looked around the room once more, “I think that’s everything.” He stepped closer to Harry, “It was great getting to know you over this year, Harry. You truly are James and Lily’s, son.” He then pulled the boy into a tight embrace.

“Thanks, sir,” Harry said as they broke apart.

“Call me, Remus. I’m not your professor any longer,” Remus said clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “Do you want any help carrying your stuff down?”

Remus shook his head. “I’ll only take a few things with me. The others will be sent on in a few days.”

Harry nodded as he watched his former professor collect his battered briefcase in one hand and slip the tank that once held the grindylow under the other.

“Severus,” Remus said politely as he departed. The Potions Master holding the door open for his departing colleague.

Harry watched the ex-Defense instructor leave, his spirits that had been high since Sirius’ successful escape falling through the floor.

“What’s the matter, Potter?” Snape said taking in the features of the disheartened boy.

“Everything we did last night doesn’t matter,” Harry sulked.

“I would tend to disagree,” Snape said after a moment.

“I’m still stuck leaving with the Dursleys, everyone still thinks Sirius killed all those people and has to stay in hiding and…and Pettigrew got away and he’s going to go off and join Voldemort.” Harry finally concluded.
“Yes,” Snape agreed. “That is all true. But you saved two lives last night, Harry. If it were not to the Headmaster sending you and Granger back both Black and the hippogriff would have lost their lives for little reason. And even if Black had been acquitted, there was no way the Professor Dumbledore would have allowed to live with him.” Snape said observing the downtrodden teen.

Harry looked up at the man, his head cocked to one side. “Why not? He’s my godfather.”

“Preciously,” Snape said, “Black is not a blood relative. Therefore, living with him will not offer you the protection residing with Petunia does. You must call Privet Drive home, at least until you come of age.”

“That’s not home,” Harry countered, “It has never been. Hogwarts was the first home I’ve ever.”

“You are not the only one to call this castle home, Harry,” Snape said. “I know how unpleasant it can be to have to go back to a home where you are unwanted. But you have an advantage I never had.”

Harry’s head shot up surprised, “What’s that?”

“I will leave that to you to figure out,” Snape said snarkily. “Even a foolhardy Gryffindor should be able to come to the logical conclusion.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left the confused teen standing an almost bare classroom.

It was the last morning of the term. The Gryffindors had stayed up late celebrating their winning of the House Cup once again. The train would be leaving for London in a few short hours, students were drifting in to eat breakfast while others finished collecting and packing their belongings. Harry and Neville had finished their packing before coming down to breakfast. They were sitting at the Gryffindor table playing a game of chess as Hedwig came floating down from the high windows in the Great Hall.

“Hi girl,” Harry said running a hand down her chest feathers.

“Who’s that from?” Neville asked.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said handing a scrap of bacon to the owl. Harry tore open the envelope and moved a note along with a familiar piece of parchment.

The note read:

Harry,

I didn’t think Severus would appreciate me giving this to you in front of him. Still, as I am no longer your teacher, I feel no guilt returning this to you. Put it to good use and try not to let Severus know you have it back. You would make your parents proud.

Until we see each other again,
Remus

There was a smaller envelope tucked inside the envelope with the map. Harry opened it curiously.
Harry,

I’m sorry I never got to tell you that I was the one to send you the Firebolt at Christmas. I ordered it and told them to withdraw the gold from my vault. I never meant to frighten you that night in Surrey or during your game. I only wished to see you. You fly just like your father.

Sirius

“Hermione is never going to let you forget she was right about that,” Neville said moving his knight to check Harry’s king.

Harry shrugged but knew his friend was probably right. There was a second note as well.

I, Sirius Black, being Harry’s godfather do hereby grant him permission to visit the village of Hogsmeade on designated weekends,

Sirius Black

“Do you think that will work?” Neville asked.

Harry grinned, “It’ll probably good enough for Dumbledore. I don’t think Snape will like it too much though.”

The train ride back to London was uneventful Fred and George stopped by and all of them discussing their plans for the summer. Hermione’s family was going to spend a week in Majorca. Neville was off to see his Great Uncle Algie and Great Aunt Enid for several weeks. Harry was certain the Dursleys didn’t have anything exciting plan, and if they did, he wasn’t going. Fred and George hoped their dad could be able to get tickets for the Quidditch Cup that summer if he did they would make sure he could ones of Harry and Hermione. Neville said not to bother, there was no way his gran would let him go.

The closer they train got to London the quitter Harry got.

“Are you alright mate?” George asked.

“Fine,” Harry said unconvincingly.

Hermione waited until the twins left to ask, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry reassured. “I’m just worried about Sirius.”

Hermione nodded. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“At least now you know he’s not trying to kill you,” Neville pointed out.

“Right,” Harry agreed, “but the Dursleys don’t.”
Neville and Hermione looked at each other.

“Harry,” Hermione asked.

A wicked grin spread across Harry’s face, “Don’t worry Hermione, I won’t do anything against the rules. My aunt and uncle might just be surprised to hear I have a godfather that’s a convicted murder.” Then added to himself, “That’s what Snape meant.”

Harry was expecting his family to be surprised by the news of him having a godfather. It was nothing to rival Harry’s own as Sirius and Remus stood on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters waiting for Harry to arrive.

“What are you doing here?” Harry demanded as Sirius pulled him into a hug. “What about the Ministry aren’t they still looking for you?”

“I’ve been cleared. With what you, Remus, Dumbledore and even Snivellus had to say convinced Fudge to let me off,” Sirius explained.

“Really?” Harry asked.

“Yep,” Sirius confirmed. “Even Fudge couldn’t argue against that amount of testimony.”

"But Professor Snape..." Harry began.
Sirius dismissed the concern with a wave of his hand. "Don't worry about it, Harry. Snivellus doesn't know what he's talking about."

Harry’s goodbyes to his family were short, but not very sweet. Uncle Vernon said something along the lines, “Good riddance to bad rubbish.” Aunt Petunia only shook Harry’s hand stiffly. With this sort of greeting at the station, this summer looked like it was going to be much better than the last. It was easy to push aside the worry and fear Pettigrew’s escape might mean... at least for a little while.
Summer 1994

Harry sat up in his cot in Ron's room at the Burrow. His face and back were drenched in a cold sweat. He rubbed gently at the scar on his forehead that still ached. Harry was worried about that, his scar had only hurt like this once before when he was in the presence of Lord Voldemort.

Mr. Weasley had gotten the tickets for the Quidditch World Cup through a friend at work. He had offered to get ones for Sirius and Remus, but being so close to the full moon, Remus didn't think he would be up to it. Sirius wanted to make sure his friend was okay, so was staying behind as well. Harry was excited to attend his first professional Quidditch match, even if his guardians weren't coming with him. Hermione would be joining them later that week to go to the match too. Though Quidditch was not really her favorite thing, Hermione could not pass up this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Hermione wasn't the only one coming in for the game. Bill, the oldest Weasley child was coming all the way from Egypt. He was supposed to arrive the day before the match.

Harry climbed out of bed and padded down the three flights of stairs to the kitchen, not wanting to wake Ron up. He found some parchment and quill and scratched out a letter to his godfather.

Dear Sirius,
I hope you and Remus are doing okay after the full moon. How was it? I had a weird sort of dream last night. I woke up with my scar hurting. That's only ever happened once before when You-Know-Who was there. He can't be anywhere here now, can he?
Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?
Harry

He folded it up and placed Sirius name on the front.

Harry had come to visit the Weasley because of the full moon. Remus didn't want Harry around during his transformation. Harry could understand his friend's unease with his presence, having seen it once. Snape made Remus the Wolfsbane Potion, but for everyone's peace of mind Harry came to the Burrow early.

On the second piece of parchment, he started another letter this one to Professor Snape. Harry wasn't sure how to write this letter. It was even harder to write than the first one. Harry didn't want to worry his teacher but the man always made it clear if Harry needed someone to talk to he was available.

Dear Professor Snape,
I hope you're having a good summer. Last night I had a weird sort of dream. I woke up with my scar still hurting. It's weird since the only time that's happened was when I faced Quirrell.
I'm okay. I'm at the Burrow because of Remus' transformation. We're going to the Quidditch Cup at the end of the week. I'm really excited. This is my first time seeing a professional Quidditch match.
Harry

He frowned as he read his letter through once more. He wasn't sure if he should send this to his professor. Professor Snape had always looked out for Harry, but that was before Harry had his godfather. Then again, the man had stopped Harry on his way down to the train to tell him if he needed anything this summer, even if it was only someone sane to play chess with, not to be afraid to reach out. Harry wasn't sure what he meant by that, or why he thought Sirius might not take care of him.
There was a creak on the stairs as someone else came down them. Harry looked up to see Mrs. Weasley still dressed in a fuzzy pink bathrobe. She smiled at Harry.

"Good morning dear, you're up early. Did you sleep alright? Ron's snoring didn't wake you did it?" She asked as she started pulling out pans and ingredients for breakfast.

"No, I slept fine. Ron's snoring isn't as bad as Neville's. I just err... Had... Err would it be okay if I borrowed Errol?" Harry asked nervously.

"What about Hedwig dear," she asked, not exactly as no, but a way to get more information.

"Er...I need to send two letters," Harry hesitated.

"Is everything alright dear?" She asked Harry could tell her overprotective mother-side was starting to show.

"No...Yes... I'm fine...I just wanted to see how Remus was doing after the full moon."

"You don't have to owl for that you could Floo call Sirius anytime you like," Molly said sitting down with a cup of coffee.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to bother them."

"And the second owl?" Mrs. Weasley pressed.

"Oh...uhhh... The Dursleys."

Mrs. Weasley's eyebrows disappeared into her fiery red hair. "Your Muggle family? I didn't think you got on from what Ron and the twins have to say."

Harry shrugged, "I just feel like they should know I'm alive and doing okay with Sirius."

"That's very sweet of you if that's the case," Mrs. Weasley said taking a sip of coffee. "Of course, you may use Errol, Harry dear."

"Thanks," Harry said folding up the second letter.

"Use Errol for your letter to Sirius, Remus lives much closer than the Muggles," Mrs. Weasley requested as she went back to bustling about making breakfast.

Harry nodded and secured each letter to the appropriate owl. He watched as they disappeared into the horizon. He had no idea how long it would take for either of them to respond, he hoped it was soon.

Harry pushed aside his worries as the as faded and they played a pickup game of Quidditch out in the apple orchard. It wasn't as nice as flying out at Remus' house where there was no one around for miles but it was always good to be in the air.

There were some advantages to being at the Burrow. He didn't have to worry about Sirius having swapped the sugar in his tea for salt or disappearing half his socks, forcing him to wear mismatching socks.

The next few days were passed playing Quidditch and discussing who was going to win. The match was between Ireland and Bulgaria. England had done embarrassingly badly in the early matches. Bill argued through most of dinner about which had a better team. Fred and George said Ireland, but they did like Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker.
Hedwig returned as they were just shuffling off to bed.

"Is everything alright?" Hermione asked as Harry anxiously opened his letter.

"It's fine," he reassured her.

He hung back on the bottom floor so he could read his letter in peace. He didn't want her asking questions about why he was writing letters to the surly Potions instructor. Harry wasn't sure what he expected it to say. He was pretty sure it wasn't like this.

Potter,
You dolt. Inform me the instant this happens again. Do not use your owl, she is too easily recognized.
SS

Harry read through the letter once more. The professor started off by insulting him, that was never good. Harry didn't know exactly what he did to deserve it though.

Sirius' own letter arrived the next morning, before dawn.

Harry,
I don't think you should worry too much about it. We've had a bit of a talk with Dumbledore. He wants to know if it happens again. Have fun at the match,
Sirius

Harry read the letter in the early morning light as they walked up the hill. They had to walk a few miles so they could catch a Portkey to where the match was being held. They were met by another Ministry employee and his son. They all knew the teen, Cedric Diggory. The twins still hadn't forgiven him for beating the Gryffindor team in Quidditch last year.

Harry discovered he didn't care for the sensation of using a Portkey, like a hook pulling you by the navel. So far, the only way Harry liked traveling was on his broom. It's too bad he wasn't able to do that everywhere.

The Dursley's never went camping, they hated nature, so why would they? That meant Harry had never been camping, even if he had, it would not have prepared him for this trip. Mr. Weasley borrowed a tent from the other wizard in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. Though it looked like a normal Muggle family tent, it three rooms, a stove, and multiple sets of bunk beds. Harry could forgive for smelling of cats for these comforts, not that Mr. Weasley wanted to use them. He insisted on doing things the Muggle way that took three times as long and would have taken longer if Hermione wasn't an experienced camper.

Harry and Ron were sent to get water and ran across a number of people they went to school with, including Seamus and Dean. Oliver Wood stopped them, introducing Harry to his father and let Harry known he had been picked to play professionally for Puddlemere United. They also ran across the Lovegoods.

Luna had been outside collecting some sort of root to make tea. Ron had done their best to avoid her, he thought she was weird. Luna and her father lived a little ways away from the Burrow and would occasionally visit the Weasleys for dinner.

Harry told Ron about his encountered with Luna last year. Ron looked at him as he too was mad. Why would he believe Harry there were invisible horses that pulled the carriages? Harry didn't want to at first, it was only running into Luna that convinced him he wasn't crazy.
The night before the match was filled with excitement. The Irish fans were celebrating raucously. The Ministry officials in duty had to make sure no magic was been by the Muggles. When the Muggles did notice anything they would have to perform memory charms to make them forget their questions.

The match itself was wonderful. Mr. Weasley's friend that got him the tickets, Ludo Bagman, was a retired professional Beater who once even played for the English national team, and was the commentator for the match. The tickets he gave Mr. Weasley were for the skybox, premier seating, with the two countries Prime Ministers and other high-ranking officials, Percy's boss, Mr. Crouch being one of them. They never saw Mr. Crouch during the match, but his house-elf, Winky, was there holding his seat. Harry wished he had, then it would have been him, not Draco Malfoy sitting behind him.

The game which could have gone on weeks if no one managed to catch the Snitch was short in comparison. Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker caught the Snitch within the first several hours. But it wasn't enough to save the match for his team, Ireland was too far ahead. The twins did win their very handsome bet with Mr. Bagman though.

They all walked back to the tent to excited into sleep. Even if they wanted to, there was no way to, not with the noise coming from the victorious Irish fans. Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys stayed up late reliving the game until Ginny collapsed into her cup of hot cocoa. They woke up to screaming a few hours later.

"Oh, those Irish," George complained grabbing his coat and sliding it over his pajamas.

Harry rubbed his own eyes, his glasses on askew.

"Dad," Bill sticking his head out the door.

"What is it, Bill?" Mr. Weasley said coming to stand beside his oldest child.

People were running by the tent, screaming. They could see smoke rising from a nearby tent. The campground host and his family were suspended in the air. The wife spun upside down silently screaming.

"I need to go help," Mr. Weasley said grabbing his wand.

"We'll come with you," Bill said.

Mr. Weasley nodded, "You lot, go into the woods. Stay together. We'll come and get you when it's safe."

The six of them that were underage headed into the forest trying to find a safe place to wait. They lost Ron and Ginny in the confusion. Harry tripped painfully over a clump of roots. It was at that point they thought to use Lumos to light the end of their wands. Harry patted his pockets trying to locate his wand, it was missing.

A green cloud appeared in the sky above to crowd, it took the shape of a skull and snake. People suddenly appeared all around them, Stunning Spells electrifying the air. Harry narrowly missed being hit by one.

Mr. Crouch demanded to know about who cast the spell. None of them knew it sounded like a man from behind the bushes. He disappeared behind them to investigate, but returned only with his Stunned house elf. Hermione was horrified to see the man fire her, even after all four of the children who heard the spell cast assured him that there was no way it was a house elf who did it. Harry was
horrified to learn that his stolen wand was the one to cast the mark of Voldemort.

Mr. Weasley was able to use his Ministry connections to get them back to the Burrow early the next morning. Sirius and Remus were already there waiting when Harry and the others arrived back. They barely let him say goodbye Apparating back to Remus' house.

Sirius pulled his godson into a tight hug before demanding,

"What the Hell happened?"

"I don't know," Harry said sleepily.

"The Dark Mark was cast over the site?" Sirius demanded. Harry frowned.

"You've seen the pictures, Padfoot, you know it was." Remus handing his friend a cup of tea. Maybe that would calm the man's nerves, at least.

Sirius ran an agitated hand through his hair.

"What's the Dark Mark?" Harry asked sipping his own tea.

"It was what Death Eaters would leave at the locations of their attacks," Remus explained calmly.

"Mr. Crouch was really upset by it, more than any of the other people," Harry told them.

"He would be," Sirius grumbled. "He'd know all about who would cast that."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"His son was a Death Eater, one of the worst," Sirius said slamming his mug onto the table.

"Is that why he was so mad to see it? He accused me of casting it," Harry informed his guardians.

"He never did have any sense," Sirius snapped. "Of course, that's why he was angry. His idiot son ruined his chance to be Minister of Magic"

"Harry," Remus said drawing them all back to the present. "We are going to have to be very careful in the future. If Death Eaters are willing to come out and commit these sorts of attacks, there is nothing say they will not do worse. And with Sybil's prophecy..."

"You think Voldemort is coming back soon?" Harry asked.

"It is possible. We need to be prepared," Remus told him honestly.

"Okay," Harry reluctantly agreed. He let out a loud yawn and was promptly sent back upstairs for a nap. He woke several hours to the sound of raised voices, Sirius and Professor Snape.

Harry shoved his glasses back on and rushed downstairs. He didn't want them to start cursing each other in Remus' kitchen if he could help it.

"How dare you, you slimy git?" Sirius yelled at Snape.

"Hit a little too close to home, Black?" Snape jabbed back his wand in his hand.

"Stop it!" Harry demanded, bursting into the room.
"Potter, polite as ever," Snape remarked as he lowered his wand.

Sirius did the same. "Snape wanted to speak to you. The git wouldn't listen when we said you were asleep."


"Sirius, Severus," Remus pleaded.

Snape nodded to the werewolf, it took another long moment before the Animagus did the same.

"Now that you are awake Potter, we must have a word," Snape said gesturing toward the table.

"Right now?" asked Harry.

"You may not realize this, Potter, but the world does not revolve around you. Other people have things they need to accomplish." Snape said snidely.

Harry rolled his eyes, "I know that. That's why I figured you might need to do those things."

Snape shook his head, "No, the Headmaster thought it was best to have this conversation as soon as possible, and I would tend to agree."

"Is this about what happened at the match?" Harry asked.

"In part, it also reflects what happened in the spring and Pettigrew's escape," Snape elaborated.

"Oh," Harry said as he looked down at his twinned fingers on the table top.

"If Trelawney was correct in her prediction, the Dark Lord will return sometime in the future with the assistance of Pettigrew. It is impossible for us to know exactly when. We must be prepared for it."

"That's what Remus said," Harry said.

"Yes, well the wolf does some sort of sense," Snape admitted.

"Don't call him that," Harry chastised.

"My apologies," Snape said, not totally insincere. "Potter, if the Death Eaters are willing to make such a public display at a high-profile event, such as the World Cup, they must be hearing things."

The man rubbed uncomfortably at his covered wrist.

Harry frowned watching the action. The boy had never seen the Potion Master look so uncomfortable. The usually stoic face was clearly frustrated.

"So what does this mean?" Harry asked.

"It is unclear. It is probable I will have to... In the future, I may not be as available to you." Snape said.

Harry shook his head, "I don't understand."

"For both our safety, Harry, I will have to distance myself," Snape explained. "It would not be good for certain individuals to know of our relationship."
"Like Malfoy?" Harry suggested.

"Yes," Snape confirmed, "but there will be others."

"Who?"

"No other students know of this yet," Snape began.

"I won't tell," Harry promised.

"I wouldn't care if you did, Potter. I simply think you must have all the perennate information. The school will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament. There will be students and teachers from two other schools in the castle much of the year. We must be careful around them," Snape explained.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"We simply must," Snape said exasperatedly.

"Is it because they're foreign?"

"No," Snape said rolling his eyes. "It is because there is no way to know if the Dark Lord has already infiltrated these schools."

"Okay," Harry agreed reluctantly.

Snape nodded, "I will see you September first, Potter."

"Yes sir," Harry said getting to his feet.

Snape did so as well, "Be sure to inform me if you have another of this dreams that make your scar ache."

"Yes sir," Harry did again. He walked the man out of the house and into the backyard.

Harry spent the rest of his holiday at home working on his neglected summer homework. Remus made sure it was completed to a satisfactory level, not rushed through like what Ron and many others seemed to turn in.

Before they knew it was already September first. Sirius pushed Harry's cart for him as they walked through King's Cross Station. It was great having people with him to see him off that would actually miss him when he was gone, he'd never had that with the Dursleys. Little things like that still caught him off guard sometimes. Harry grinned up at Remus who walked beside him. This was going to be his best year ever at Hogwarts, he was certain, nevermind what Snape said about having to watch out for Death Eaters and all that. He had a family, or at least something close to it. It was his, not just hanging on like what he did at the Dursleys, or even the Weasleys.

Sirius ran full speed at the pillar that led to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, barely looking to see if any Muggles were watching.

Remus shook his head, "Somethings never change."

Harry and Remus casually leaned against the barrier before tipping onto their destination platform. The Hogwarts Express fiery red engine gleamed in the sun. The platform was placed with families saying goodbye to their children. Owls hooted in their cages, voices raised causing the commotion of friends seeing each other for the first time in months.
Remus and Harry caught up with Sirius halfway down the train. He was talking to Mr. Weasley. The luggage trolley was already empty, so he must have already picked a compartment for Harry. He didn't mind at all.

It felt strange, to him. He was excited to start his fourth year at Hogwarts, but he was sad too. He had finally settled into a pattern at home. He would miss seeing Remus in the morning as he made breakfast for everyone. Harry chose to make them, not because he had to, but he wanted to, unlike at the Dursleys when Aunt Petunia woke him every morning by banging on his door to get him started on everyone's meals. He would miss talking the latest Quidditch standings with Sirius. It was all so normal.

Now he was heading off back to school, a year that promised to more dangerous from the start if Professor Snape was to be believed. Harry had never gone wrong trusting the man's judgment but he wondered if Sirius wasn't concerned as the Potions Master. Maybe, it was just their contempt for each other that prevented them from agreeing. Harry just knew he needed them both in his life.

"Ahhh...Harry, there you are," Mr. Weasley said clapping Harry on the shoulder.

Harry smiled at him.

"Sirius was just telling me about your last week back at home. He said you tried your hand at the Wronski Feint," Mr. Weasley said with a chuckle.

"I thought Moony might go into heart failure," Sirius said with his great bark of a laugh.

"Yes, yes, laugh it up at my expense," Remus rolling his eyes.

"I don't know what could be so funny," an old, but surprisingly strong voice said coming up behind them.

The laughter stopped in an instant.

"Augusta," Remus said stepping forward and offering his hand.

"Lupin," she greeted placing her claw-like hand in his rough one.

She glared at Sirius, "Black."

"Hey Neville," Harry greeted his friend.

"Hey," he replied as they watched the tense interaction between their guardians.

"What's up with your gran?" Harry asked.

Neville shrugged.

"Augusta, I was so sorry to hear about what happened to Frank and Alice," Sirius said sadly.

Mrs. Longbottom continued to glare at Sirius. "It was at the hands of your cousin and husband you know. It would have been better if they'd killed them."

The train whistle blared.

"Come on you lot, let's get you settled on the train," Mr. Weasley said redirecting the attention to the boys standing by quietly. It only took a moment for them to get the two of them loaded on the train in Hermione's preselected compartment. Mrs. Weasley made sure to give Harry a hug and kiss just like any of her own children before he boarded the train. The train pulled away from the platform like it
Harry waved to his family as the train began to move until they vanished from view turning the first corner.

Harry sank back down the bench across from Neville. Hermione had pulled out a ball of yarn and a set of Muggle knitting needles.

Harry raised a curious eyebrow,"What's with those?"

"You'll see," she said as her only response.

Neville shrugged, the quiet boy, was more so than usual.

"What's wrong, Neville?" Harry asked.

The other boy only shrugged.

"What did your gran mean when she was talking with Sirius?" Harry asked.

Neville looked away from the window and to Harry for the first time.

Harry tried again, "What did she mean, 'it would have been better if she killed them'?"

Neville looked back out the window.

"Your parents aren't dead," Hermione asked, looking up from her stitches.

Neville shook his head. There was a long moment's silence before he spoke again.

"They...they were tortured... Tortured with an Unforgivable Curse...until they lost their sanity..." Neville said shakily. He hastily wiped the tear that threatened to fall from his eye.

"Oh Neville, I'm so sorry," Hermione said sadly.

"Thanks," Neville whispered.

In the three years they had known each other the boy had never mentioned his parents. Harry always thought they must have died like his own parents, in the war against Voldemort. He was wrong. That must have been so much worse, to have your parents alive and unable to take care of you.

"Where are they?" Hermione asked.

"Hospital," Neville muttered wiping away another tear, "London, Permanent Spell Damage Ward."

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

Neville shrugged the silence in the small chamber heavy, only to be broken by the door sliding open once more.

"Anything from the trolley dears," the old witch asked.

Hermione and Neville shook their heads. Harry stepped forward his money bag in hand and picked a wide selection of snacks put out to the other two. Harry handed her a handful of gold without much thought. Since he had found out he was a wizard Harry always had more than enough pocket money. He always got more when he went to Gringotts. But when he moved in with Sirius, his godfather, he had even more. It was possibly more money had ever before. It was a nice kind of strange.
The three of them ate in silence until the door opened once again.

"Hi," Harry and Neville greeted as Fred and George came into the carriage.

"Hello you three," George said sitting down next to Neville and helping himself to a cauldron cake.

"Any better idea what Percy was on about during the Quidditch World Cup?" Harry asked as he passed Fred a pumpkin pasty.

Fred shook his head. "The silly prat wants us to ask, but then he won't tell us anything."

"We gave it up, after a week of the git doing that," George added.

"I might have an idea," Harry said between bites of a chocolate frog.

"What?" Everyone asked excitedly.

Harry shrugged uncertainty. "I don't know exactly, Professor Snape said something about the Triwizard Tournament. He said there would be foreigners around the school. And he's worried..." But Harry shook his head.

Harry refused to continue. Hermione watched him trying to figure something out. The weather got colder and darker the further the north they went. Much of the rest of the trip was filled with games of Exploding Snap and talk of why there might be guests at the school and what it could mean for them.

Harry was hoping that for once he could have a normal school year. He just wanted to be able to enjoy whatever it was like everyone else. He knew Professor Snape wanted him to be vigilant about their guests. The professor and Sirius didn't agree on much, but they were both concerned about Harry's strange dreams that made his scar ache. They only disagreed on how concerned they were. Professor Snape wanted to know the instance Harry had another of those dreams. Sirius had a discussion with Professor Dumbledore about it, but they hadn't said any more about it to Harry.

The rain picked up as the train slowed into the station in Hogsmeade. Harry hurried behind Neville and Hermione as they ran for one of the thestral drawn carriages out front. Harry had never asked his friends if they could see the creatures too. He hoped they couldn't.

This was the first year Harry was able to see the Sorting since his own four years ago. He was surprised to learn the Sorting Hat wrote a new song every year. Neville liked the one from their second year best, but this year's was okay.

The question on why there would be visitors in the castle was answered as soon as Professor Dumbledore rose to address the student body. Hogwarts was to play host to the Triwizard Tournament this year, for the first time in a hundred years. The other schools would arrive the day before Halloween. Each school would put students forward to represent them and have one champion selected by an impartial judge.

Harry was relieved no one could make him participate because this year the submission were to be voluntary. Even if he wanted to compete, wouldn't be allowed, the champion was to be of age, seventeen years old at least. It sounded like it would be fun to watch and cheer on the Hogwarts champion, whoever it was. The only thing that upset Harry about it all was there would be no Quidditch this year. It was a good thing Oliver graduated last year, his head might have exploded at that bit of news if he had been present.

Dinner appeared as usual on the golden plates before them, everyone tucking happily into their dinners, (except Hermione who was not eating in solidarity with the house elf cooks) until the doors
to the Great Hall banged open. The oddest looking man Harry had ever seen limped into the room and up to the teachers’ dais. Harry and the rest of the student body watch him with great curiosity.

The man, Alastor Moody, was a retired Auror, dark wizard catcher, according to the Weasley twins. He was a bit mad but was great at his job. That was probably half the reason he was so crazy, you can only spend so long with people trying to kill you all the time before becoming paranoid.

Harry shifted uncomfortably under the gaze of Moody's, magical eye. It was large, electric blue, and probably three times bigger than his natural one. It zoomed all around the socket before always returning to Harry. He wasn't the only one it returned to he noticed, but Professor Snape as well. The look of disdain on the Potions Master's face was normally reserved for Harry's godfather. Harry had to wonder if the two had a personal history, or if Moody hated all those that were once associated with the Death Eaters. He would have to wait and see.

Harry sleepily followed his fellow Gryffindors up the stair to their house Common Room and then their circular dormitory. The talk the entire way up was filled with excited talk of the Triwizard Tournament, who the possible champion might be, and what they might do with the thousand Gallon prize. Harry listened to Ron animatedly discuss how he would spend his winnings on a new broom, followed by at least it seemed to Harry, upgrading everything he owned.

Harry fell asleep wondering who would be the champion and what this year might bring them. He smiled in his sleep that he would never have to worry about the tasks and being scolded for taking unnecessary risks by Professor Snape because he wouldn't be taking part.
Snape's dislike for Moody did not seem to be shared by the rest of the castle. Lee Jordan and the Weasley twins came to lunch the afternoon of their first day back boasting of how amazing the class had been. Ron complained loudly the first of their own Defense Against the Dark Arts would not be until Wednesday. Lee and the twins were not the only ones impressed, however. Moody seemed to have made an impression on many of the students be it good or bad. All respected him, a rare enough feat for the rotating door of instructors.

Harry like the rest of his classmates was curious what this experienced Auror may have to teach them. This man had seen the worst that wizardkind could do to one another and lived to tell the tale. He bore the evidence of just how it could be, with the missing chunk of his nose, the restless magical blue eye, and a thick wooden stump instead of a right leg. Then there were the behaviors that weren't commented on like always drinking from a flask, jumping at sudden noises, flinching if people tried to touch him. Nobody said a word, possibly even noticed, but after years of first Snape, and then Sirius telling him to paying attention to those around him Harry couldn't help but notice. Harry wondered what had happened to make the man so nervous even at a dinner table in the safety of Hogwarts.

The fourth years were not disappointed during their first lesson with Moody. The man gave them a demonstration of all three Unforgivable Curses, the Cruciate, the Imperius, and Killing. After the demonstration, Moody had each student try and fight off the Imperius Curse, a spell that was used to control the actions of another. It could be thrown off if they one under control had enough will power. Harry was the only one in his class to throw off the hex.

Neville was visibly shaken after the demonstration of the Cruciate Curse. Moody kept him after class, Neville wouldn't tell Harry exactly what they discussed, he was too lost in the book the man had lent him, some sort of herbology text or other. Professor Sprout had told Moody of Neville’s skill in the subject.

Moody lessons were the subject of discussion during dinner. Harry was one of the only people able to throw off the curse. Nobody knew how he could throw it off. Moody had made him repeat the exercise until he could do it every time. Seamus was still skipping every other step because that's what Moody ordered him to do under the spell. It wasn't only the Gryffindors that heard about Harry's feat.

"Detention Potter," Snape snapped as Harry frantically tried to clean the mess of his ruined potion the next day in Potions, "Tonight, seven o'clock."

"Yes sir," Harry sighed.

"Good job Potter," Malfoy remarked from the next table over.

"Why does he always do that?" Ron who was Harry's partner for the day asked. "He gives you detention every time. He doesn't give Neville detention when he messes up. He does a lot worse than you."
Harry shrugged, "I don't know, why don't you ask Professor Snape?"

"Are you mad?" Ron said shaking his head back and forth with great fervor.

"Me neither," Harry grumbled, putting his ingredients into his case, "I just do what he says."

Ron nodded, unsure what to say.

"You okay?" Neville asked as they headed back up the stairs towards the Great Hall for dinner.

"Just Snape being Snape," Harry said.

"The detention," Hermione clarified.

Harry nodded, "Ron wanted to know why he's always giving me detentions. I don't know what to tell him."

"Why don't you ask him?" Neville suggested.

Harry shrugged, "I don't know. I don't mind I guess. I'm not missing Quidditch."

Hermione shook his head, "That's not a good reason, Harry."

"Alright," Harry conceded. He didn't really eat much at dinner to worried about what might happen during detention. He hadn't done anything too wrong, he didn't risk his life or break any real rules. He left Hermione and Neville working on their Transfiguration homework. He dragged his feet to the dungeon, knowing Snape would be mad, but really caring. He didn't deserve it as it was.

"You're late, Potter," Snape barked at him.

Harry shrugged, just sinking into one of the desks, not saying a word.

"This behavior is unacceptable, Potter."

"So what? You'll give me another detention?" Harry demanded.

"Consider your next words very carefully," Snape warned.

Harry glared at the man. "Why? I didn't do anything to deserve this one. I messed up my potion. Everyone does that sometimes. You never give Neville detention for doing the same thing. How is that fair?" Harry's voice cracked on these last words.

Snape paused for a moment before he spoke. "You of all people should realize that world is unfair, Harry. I told you before the start of term that I would not be able to see you as freely as in the past."

"So you gave me detention?" Harry asked. "But the other schools aren't here yet."

"They are not," Snape agreed, "but they are not the only ones we need to concern ourselves with in that manner."

Harry frowned, his failure to understand clear.
'Potter, the Dark Lord had many followers, most of which were never caught or punished by the Ministry. Even if they were they have not given up their support. Most of those individuals have gone on to have children, your school mates. You should be able to name a few.'

'Malfoy,' Harry breathed.

'Indeed.' Snape agreed, 'Now, there is a sink full of first-year cauldrons waiting for your attention.'

'I didn't think this was supposed to be a real detention,' Harry protested.

'It was not, but then you were late and disrespectful. Get to work, Potter.' Snape said pointing to the sinks.

Harry sighed, 'Yes sir.' He worked in silence for a few minutes in relative quiet. The only sound coming from the sink filling and Harry scrubbing at a stubborn spot on his first cauldron, Snape's quill scratching across a piece of parchment. 'You know sir,' Harry said breaking the silence, 'You might want to find a different way to talk to me.

'Why is that, Potter?' Snape said, his quill not even pausing in its movement.

'Ron asked me why I'm always getting detention when Neville never does,' Harry explained.

'I will take that under consideration,' Snape said after a moment.

Harry rinsed the first cauldron before setting it aside, 'How come I always get detention when I mess up and Neville doesn't.'

'Longbottom is completely hopeless in the subject, you have no such excuse. You come from two talented brewers. You simply fail to pay attention.' Snape said moving back to his work. There was another long silence this time broken by Snape, 'It seems that your stubbornness does have some practical uses.'

'Sir,' Harry said stopping midway stacking his just finished cauldron.

'You may not be surprised to learn you are often the topic of discussion in the amongst the faculty,' Snape explained.

Harry shook his head, 'I don't...'

'I was referring to your accomplishment of throwing off the Imperius Curse. It is a very useful skill to possess, Harry.'

'Oh,' Harry said, 'I wasn't trying or anything, just didn't think jumping off the desk was a good idea.'

'Was that the only thing Moody requested of you?' Snape asked interestedly.

Harry shook his head, 'Just the first time.'

'I see. Then I will stand by my original assessment, your incomparable stubbornness does have an occasional usefulness.' Snape said. He removed his watch from his waistcoat pocket, 'That will be
"Okay," Harry agreed, drying his hands on his jeans.

Snape shook his head in disapproval. "Hurry, you do not wish to be caught out after hours."

Harry made his way upstairs much faster than he had come down. He didn't know what to think of the evening. Was Snape mad at him at first? But he also was proud of him for throwing off the curse?

The first two months back at Hogwarts were probably the slowest Harry had ever experienced during his time at Hogwarts. He didn't have his usual distraction of Quidditch practices to help break up his evenings. Instead, he spent his nights working on homework with Hermione and Neville or maybe having a game of chess with Ron or Neville. The twins were always up for a game of Exploding Snap or Gobstones. It was nice to have more than one or two nights a week to do his work. His marks had always been good, but he had always had to rush to get everything done.

An announcement appeared on the Common Room notice board informing the Gryffindors the guests from Beauxbaton and Durmstrang would arrive Friday afternoon, the day before Halloween. The class was to be released early, in order for students to return their books to their dormitories and have time to assemble in front of the school. Ron was excited to get out of double Potions that afternoon. Harry was nervous, after all, Professor Snape and Sirius had to say about he wasn't too sure he wanted to be there for the introductions.

The pending arrival was the sole topic of discussion the next several days. Malfoy could be heard bragging that his father wanted to send him to Durmstrang, but his mother didn't want him to be so far away. Fred lamented Malfoy's mother liked him. If he'd gone to Durmstrang they could have pushed him into a fjord. This made Harry ask where Durmstrang was located. Nobody knew exactly, just that it was in the north, they had heavy fur collars as part of their uniforms. Beauxbaton was somewhere in France.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower after lunch on Friday.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked. "You don't want to see the students from the others schools?"

"Not really," Harry admitted, "Professor Snape and Sirius said I can't trust any of them."

"Oh Harry, they're here to compete, do you think we'll really get to spend much time with them?"

"Professor Dumbledore said it was supposed to be," Neville screwed up his face in concentration, "'fostering spirits of international friendship'."

"I know Neville," Hermione sighed, "but why would they want to make friends with us?"

The boys looked at one another and then to Hermione.
"I'm The-Boy-Who-Lived, Hermione." Harry reminded her.

She rolled her eyes, "Yes, but other than that."

"That tends to be enough," Harry shrugged.

"Well, once they spend some time with you, they'll see you're perfectly normal," Hermione said haughtily.

"Thanks," Harry said dryly.

Since the three of them were relatively short they ended up in the front of the group of fourth years. The school was organized by year versus by house. Malfoy stood next to Hannah Abbott, three people away from Harry. Malfoy's usual henchmen Crabbe and Goyle two rows behind him. Teachers went around straightening up lines, adjusting robes and hats to smarten up anyone that looked the least bit shabby. The closer to the expected arrival time the more anxious the staff seemed to become.

The students watched the drive to the school waiting for something to happen. Nothing was happening, there were no carriages, nothing. That was until, Dennis Creevey, Colin's younger brother pointed out a fastly approaching flying carriage. It was drawn by half a dozen fiery-eyed giant flying horses. Hagrid would love taking care of them, Harry thought.

The Beauxbaton students rushed into the castle, their thin blue silk robes no match for the chilly late October air of Scotland. Only their headmistress, a woman as tall and slightly less wide stayed behind. Harry couldn't blame them for not wanting to wait for Durmstrang to arrive. At this point, he too wanted to get inside. Everyone was looking for where they might come from, down the road, or in the sky. A huge sucking sound drew their attention to the lake. A two-masted ship had appeared on the water.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

The students, all boys Hermione pointed out filed past in their heavy burgundy, fur-lined robes. Their headmaster was accompanied by one student.

"That's Krum!" Ron said pointing at the young man standing with his headmaster and Dumbledore. A buzz of conversation broke out among the students. An international Quidditch star was here at Hogwarts. He was still a student. It was hard to believe. Ron hoped they would come sit with the Gryffindors, but was all but heartbroken when they chose to join the Slytherins.

At the feast, Dumbledore welcomed everyone to the castle and went over the rules once more. That contestants must be seventeen years or older, that once the name was selected by the judge as the school champion, they were bound to compete for the remainder of the tournament. The person with the highest score at the end of the three tasks would the thousand Galleon prize. The judge, it turned out was the Goblet of Fire, an ancient looking trophy with dancing blue flames. Anyone wishing to compete was to put their name in the goblet before lunch the next day. The winners would be chosen at the end of the Halloween Feast that evening.

Harry like the rest of his house and all of Hogwarts it seemed got up early the next morning to watch people put their names in. Durmstrang had stuck in before breakfast to enter all their names. Beauxbaton did theirs as a group after breakfast. Angelina Johnson just made the cutoff, by a few days her birthday being the week previous. Fred and George were six months too young, they still tried by taking a few sips of Aging Potion. It didn't work though, they were thrown out sprouting
magnificent white beards that rivaled only Dumbledore himself. The Goblet was moved away from the Great Hall after lunch so it could select from the names free of tampering. In only a few hours each school would have their champion. The spirits of the castle were high, each house routing for their member to become Hogwarts champion.

The air over dinner was tense, nobody was eating. It wasn't that the food wasn't delicious as always. The house elves outdid themselves, but it wasn't as special having a feast just the day before. But the real issue was everyone just wanting to know who was to compete for their school. The Goblet of Fire was brought back out as dessert was cleared away with a wave of Dumbledore's wand.

"Once the name of the champion is called they are to proceed through this door behind me. There they will discuss how the tournament is to continue with Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman, the representatives of the Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore instructed. A flaming piece of paper shot out of the cup, Hogwarts' headmaster caught with ancient, but nimble fingers. "The champion for Durmstrang is Viktor Krum!"

The sloped shoulders and duck-footed teen waddled past the Dumbledore. His own headmaster, the long-haired, slimy, Igor Karkaroff clapped him excitedly on the shoulder. The surly teen did not show any real response to the announcement, just made his way into out of the hall. The cheers for the boy finally calmed after several minutes.

The second piece of parchment flew out, "Fleur Delacour will represent Beauxbaton."

A pretty girl with silver blonde hair rose from the Ravenclaw table.

"She's a Veela," Ron guessed.

"You're daft," George said, his eyes fixed on the girl all the same.

"No normal girl's that pretty," Ron protested.

"The last and Hogwarts School champion will be," Dumbledore said before snagging the third name from the air, "Hufflepuff's Cedric Diggory."

The Hufflepuff table exploded in celebration. The house was very rarely given a chance to be applauded by the rest of the school. The hard working lot was often overlooked. Their defeat of Gryffindor was the previous year was the most notice the house received, probably in a decade, Harry guessed. Harry was glad if it couldn't be a Gryffindor that Cedric would represent Hogwarts, he was a Quidditch player after all.

The hush that had come over the hall as the names were read burst like a balloon. Hundreds of voices filled the hall, all discussing the merits and odds of winning of the various contestants. Many were too busy talking to notice the Ministry officials, teachers, and Headmaster Dumbledore were still watching the Goblet of Fire. The blue flames threw out another piece of parliament. Dumbledore snatched it out of the air.

"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

Harry sat frozen.

"Harry? You put your name in?" Neville asked.
Harry shook his head.

"Harry, how did it pull out your name?" Hermione tried.

Harry shook his head again.

"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore called again.

"Go on mate," "Come on, Harry," Fred and George urged.

Harry walked slowly through the now almost silent Great Hall. He looked to Professor McGonagall, she sharp features turned downward. There was an unusually cold look in Professor Snape's eyes as well.

"Go on Harry," Dumbledore requested.

Harry nodded slowly, hoping that the man might say something more, but he didn't. Harry joined the other teens in the small chamber. Harry wished the world could just swallow him up and leave him alone for once. He took a seat in a chair in the corner hoping everyone would just forget about him. Professor Snape was the first to enter the room, Harry didn't notice him at first as he sat curled on his chair. He did notice an odd sort of buzzing sensation in his ears but thought it must be his nerves.

"Potter," Snape said standing in front of the boy.

"Sir," Harry said looking up but refusing to make eye contact.

"Potter, tell the truth, did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?" Snape said sharply.

Harry's emerald eyes meet Snape's cool black ones. There were many times in the past it felt like the man could read his mind. Harry wished he would do it now so he could see he was telling the truth.

"No sir," Harry insisted.

Snape nodded and stepped away from the boy, the buzzing sensation disappearing at the same time.

Professor Dumbledore was followed by Mr. Crouch, Mr. Bagman, and the heads of the other schools.

"Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet," Dumbledore asked calmly.

"No sir," Harry said once again.

"Did you ask an older student to do so?"

Harry shook his head, "No sir. I didn't want to be a champion."

"He's lying," Karkaroff scoffed.

Dumbledore placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder. "I do not believe he is, Igor. But this does change things, Harry will have to compete."

This comment created a great deal of shouting. Harry did his best to ignore it, all he wanted was to
go back to the Tower and sleep for the next week. The three other teens were not happy to learn Harry's name was also called. Surprisingly, maybe not so surprisingly, Cedric was the least upset to learn there would be four champions, two of whom came from Hogwarts. He questioned how Harry's name was chosen, but so did Harry, the entire teaching staff, Mr. Crouch, and the heads of both visiting schools. Moody was the only person who had any sort of guess since Harry insisted he had not had somebody willing submit his name. The ex-Auror believed a skilled and powerful wizard must have Confunded the Goblet into believing four schools were participating and Harry was the only entry for this fictional school.

The first task was set for the end of the month. There were to be no hints as to what was coming in the task. Everyone was reminded there were all to compete on their own skills and intellect. Harry didn't miss Snape's disapproving snort at the comment.

Harry would have to write to Sirius. Would his godfather believe he didn't put his name in the Goblet? Harry was shaken out of his thoughts by Professor Snape sometime later. Harry noticed it was only the two of them left.

"Time for bed, Harry. You should write the mutt in the morning." Snape said leading the boy to the entrance hall.

"I can do it now," Harry said. He was having a hard time processing everything. It was like the words were coming through water.

"No, it is late, wait until morning. I am sure the headmaster will be in contact with him tonight, but he should hear from you as well."

The party waiting in Gryffindor Tower was as if Harry had won a dozen Quidditch Cups all at once, single-handedly. Harry left early, he had no desire to celebrate something he did not want. He woke early the next morning and left the dormitory before anyone else was awake. He went straight to the owlery sending off the suggested letter to his godfather. He watched as Hedwig disappeared on the horizon hoping the man would have some idea of what to do.

It was still early, too early for breakfast, Harry had no desire to return to the Common Room. Everyone wanted to know how he got his name in the Goblet of Fire without growing a beard. Even his friends were slightly skeptical. It took him nearly an hour to convince Hermione and Neville he didn't want to be champion.

Harry went down the front steps of the castle, no real destination in mind. He kicked a stone down the gravel walk. The next step he kicked it a bit further.

"That's not very nice to the stone nymph," a dreamy voice said behind him.

"Oh hi, Luna," Harry sad spotting the blonde to his right.

"Hullo Harry," she said coming to walk with him. "You're not very happy about being champion."

Harry shrugged, was it that obvious.

"It was probably ratspunks that put your name in."

Harry stopped, "You don't think I did it myself?"
"No, it was ratspunks," Luna said seriously. "If you did it yourself, you'd be much happier. You should wear a Gerber daisy to ward them off."

"Err...okay," Harry said uncertainly. "Thanks for believing I didn't do it, Luna."

"It's no problem Harry, do you want to come with me and check my nargle traps?"

Harry shook his head, "Maybe some other time."

As much as Harry didn't like attention, he wished the news of being the fourth champion was as well received by the rest of the school as if was in Gryffindor. The Hufflepuffs took particular offense to it. Harry didn't like, but he understood their feelings. The Ravenclaws and the Slytherins had sided with Hufflepuff, possibly out of jealousy, or solitary with the other move overlooked house (at least in the case of Ravenclaw). The Slytherins, well, the two houses never got along, so Harry wasn't too surprised by it. Malfoy creating, "Potter Stinks!" badges, was annoying, but totally expected.

At least, he wouldn't have to worry about the task until the end of the month, or that's what he thought. He was in the middle of making a Babbling Concoction when a second year knocked on the door of the dungeon. Harry felt bad for her, she was sent by one of the Ministry officials to collect Harry for the press shoot. Harry could have hexed Malfoy for his uncontained snicker. If looks could kill the second year would have been dead several times over. Still, Harry couldn't avoid going, no matter how much he wished he could have.

The press event was worse than anything Harry expected. He was pulled into a broom cupboard and "interviewed" by Rita Skeeter, a reporter for "The Daily Prophet". She was noisier than Aunt Petunia and twice as spiteful. Harry didn't think he said a single thing that she quoted him saying. Harry spent the week after it was published having to deal with Malfoy and other Slytherins quoting it back at him.

Sirius' response was not much comfort. He didn't know who could put Harry's name in the Goblet. There was no way to break the contract, even if he wanted to, Harry would have to compete. He needed to be careful though, it was probably someone connected that Voldemort who did it. Harry balled the letter in frustration.

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Harry yawned loudly as he stretched, he had spent the last several hours working on a complicated essay for Snape on moonstones. It was the first chance he had had to do his work after all of the insanity that was being named the fourth champion. Harry might be excused from exams at the end of the year, but he knew Snape would never excuse him for turning in substandard work. He rubbed his eyes as he stumbled up the stairs to his bed. He yawned again as he changed into his pajamas. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Harry was walking up a flight of stairs. He'd been here once before the night where his scar hurt. The huge snake lay in front of the fire like some perverse twist on the family dog doing the same thing. Pettigrew stumbled into the room, almost dropping the tray he carried. The snake raised its head curiously, before laying it back down sleepily.
"Careful Wormtail," a voice hissed from an unseen individual.

"Sorry Master," Pettigrew said nearly dropping the tray on the table in front of Voldemort.

"Your mistakes have been great Wormtail." Voldemort complained, "You almost let Bertha Jorkins escape."

"But," Pettigrew began.

"Yes, you were able to recapture her. If it were not for her we would not know what we do. We would not know what was happening at Hogwarts this year. We would not have been able to place our person in the castle." Voldemort agreed. "Harry Potter will be ours, Wormtail."

Harry woke up covered in a cold sweat, his scar burning. He tried to sit up but was overcome by a wave of nausea. He laid there wishing the room would stop spinning for several minutes. Finally able to sit up once again he put his glasses on not sure what to do. Professor Snape said if he had another of those dreams he was supposed to inform him immediately. How was he supposed to do that?

Harry threw back the sheets and grabbed his glasses. He carefully opened the lid of his trunk and removed his Invisibility Cloak. He couldn't go anywhere at this hour. He thought about telling Neville where he was going but decided against it. The other boy didn't know anything these dreams, no need to worry him about it.

He went downstairs to the Common Room, he would put the cloak on down there before he went out the portrait hole. He had never been in the room this late, so he had never seen who cleaned the room while the students slept. He knew from Hermione's crusade that it was done by house elves, elves she was single-handedly trying to free with making elf clothes that she knit herself. It looked like all of what she had left was now wore by one elf, that bustled around the room cleaning up the broken quills, empty ink jars, candy wrappers, and other detritus of Gryffindor House.

"Hello," Harry said, not wanting to startle the little creature. He recognized it instantly when it turned around. It was Dobby, the house elf, formerly owned by the Malfoys until Harry freed him at the end Harry's second year.

The elf spun around, almost toppling over with the quick change in his balance. "Hello, Harry Potter," Dobby squeaked, his huge tennis ball green eyes shining with undisguised excitement. "Dobby was hoping he's could see Harry Potter again."

Dobby was a bit mad and should never be allowed to try and save Harry's life, but he liked him. After he forgave him for breaking his arm and nearly getting him expelled. If it wasn't for the house elf, things in second year might have been far worse.

"Dobby, what are you doing here?" Harry asked surprised to see the elf again.

"Dobby is cleaning, Harry Potter, sir."

"You work here?" Harry asked surprised.

"Oh yes, Harry Potter," Dobby said nodding his head so vigorously his whole body moved. "Nobody else wants to cleans it, not with all the clothes hidden."
"Right," Harry said uncertainty. He would have to have a word with Hermione about that. "Dobby, do you know where Professor Snape's rooms are?"

"Dobby is knowing Harry Potter, but we is not supposed to be showing students to staff's private rooms."

"I wouldn't normally ask, but I really need to talk to Professor Snape, Dobby. It's like when you didn't want me coming back in second year." Harry pleaded.

That was all it took. Dobby didn't wait for Harry to pull on the Invisibility Cloak. He grabbed the boy's wrist and Apparated them to outside the professor's door. Harry recognized the painting of a deer in a moonlit forest. He would never have guessed the Potions Master's quarters behind it.

Harry knocked on the painting unsure what else to do. Dobby stood nervously by his side. Harry wondered if he should pull the cloak in case someone were to wander by and wonder what Harry was doing outside a professor's quarters in the middle of the night. The painting swung back to reveal a very irritated Severus Snape.

Snape took in the scene in front of him, a guilty looking house elf and worried teen. "Potter, it's the middle of the night, why on earth are you invading my personal space," Snape grumbled, as he tied the knot in his dark green dressing gown.

"Sorry sir, but you said you wanted me to tell you as soon as possible if I had another dream that made my scar ache," Harry said, doubting for the first time if he should have forced Dobby to bring him down here.

Snape put a hand on the boy's upper bicep, pulling him into his quarters. "I thank you for your assistance, you are dismissed," Snape said.

"Yes Professor Potion Master Snape sir," said nodding, his eyes fixed anxiously on Harry.

"I'll be fine, Dobby," Harry reassured.

It was then that Dobby was willing to leave. Harry had helped himself to a seat as the professor disappeared into a small room off the side of the sitting room. The fact he came back with several potions vials led Harry to conclude it was one of two things, another potions lab, or a bathroom. He really couldn't be sure and it was too late to care. He handed Harry a blue Headache Tonic and offered a green one Harry didn't recognize and refused to take. He slugged back the foul tasting potion in one gulp, grimacing at the taste. He closed his eyes as he waited for it to kick in.

"That elf cares for you a great deal," Snape observed.

Harry shrugged, "I guess. He's alright, he tried to save my life a couple times during second year."

Snape raised a curious eyebrow.

"He's the one that jinxed the Bludger, he figured if I got hurt I would leave school and couldn't get eaten by the basilisk."

"I see," Snape said dryly.

"I know," Harry agreed. He paused before he spoke again, "He didn't seem to like you very much,
"What do I care of the devotion of house elves, Potter?"

"Nothing, it's just sort of weird, I guess," Harry shrugged again.

"He really likes Hermione and Professor Dumbledore of course."

"Perhaps it has to do with my past affiliation with his previous masters," Snape suggested.

Harry cracked open an eye, looking skeptical up at the man.

"I was never able to cut my connections with my past, Harry. We knew that the Dark Lord will return someday, I will need to have the trust of my fellow followers, not just the Dark Lord." Snape elaborated. "Now, would you care to explain why you insisted on waking me at such a ridiculous hour?"

"My dream," Harry said frowning.

"Details, Potter. Details," Snape clarified.

"Oh," Harry said before explain all he could remember.

Snape paced back and forth in front of the fireplace as he listened. A deep frown appeared on his sallow face. "I will have to have a word with the headmaster about this."

"What am I supposed to do until then, just keep having these weird dreams?" Harry demanded.

"Yes Potter," Snape said, rolling his eyes. "I do not know how best to address your situation, I must confer with the headmaster how to proceed. I am sorry for the inconvenience."

Harry huffed, "Okay. You're not worried? Voldemort said he had someone at Hogwarts."

Snape grimaced, "I did not say that, Potter. It is late, both of us have classes in the morning. Would you like me to walk you back to your dormitory?"

Harry shook his head, "I know the way."

"Then you should head back," Snape advised.

"Yes sir," Harry said.

"And Potter..."

"Sir," Harry said somewhere to the left of the door.

"No wandering."

"Yes sir," Harry agreed, pulling the Invisibility Cloak on. The portrait swung open under the teen's unseen force before closing softly behind him.
Harry slept late the next morning after finally drifting off again just before dawn. He only woke when Neville shook his shoulder roughly. The other boy had brought him some toast and hard boiled eggs to eat on their way to Herbology. Hermione was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs.

Harry told them about where he had been the night before. They wanted to know why he hadn't told him about the dreams before now. Harry shrugged and explained about Professor Snape's reaction to writing it in a letter earlier in the summer. At lunch, Katie Bell handed Harry a roll of parchment tied with a purple ribbon.

Harry frowned, "What's this?"

"I don't know, Professor Dumbledore asked me to give it to you before breakfast, but you never came down," Katie said taking a seat a few down from Harry.

"Okay, thanks," Harry said slipping off the ribbon.

Harry,
Please come to my office this evening at 7 o'clock. By the way I'm rather fond of cockroach clusters.
Albus Dumbledore

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to talk to me tonight," Harry said slipping the parchment into his pocket.

"Do you think it's about your dream?" Neville asked.

"Maybe, I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. He had a hard time focusing on what Professor Flitwick was trying to teach them about Summoning Charms. His mind kept wandering to what Dumbledore wanted to talk about. He went straight from the Great Hall to the headmaster's office. The gargoyle hopped out of the way to display the spinning spiral staircase at the mention of cockroach clusters. Harry stepped onto the stairs riding them to the office door.

"Come in," the headmaster called before Harry could knock to announce his presence.

The headmaster sat behind his heavy wooden desk, Professor Snape stood by the fireplace. Sirius rose from one of the chairs in front of the headmaster.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked as he gave his godfather a hug.

"As your guardian, Dumbledore thought I should be here for this."
Harry took a seat next to Sirius.

"Harry, my boy it's good to see you." His blue eyes twinkled behind his half-moon spectacles. "I asked Sirius to join us tonight because if we are to proceed, we will need his permission."

Harry frowned, "Permission for what?"

"Let the headmaster explain, Potter before you ask idiotic questions," Snape said pacing in front of the fireplace.

"Harry, we are concerned these dreams you've been having are somehow connecting you to Voldemort," Dumbledore explained.

Harry shook his head, "Connected how?"

"We are not certain, but there seems to be some sort of mental link between the Dark Lord and yourself," Snape answered.

"How?" Sirius asked.

"We do not know for certain, the boy and Dark Lord have a complex history."

"Complex history?" Sirius repeated. "He tried to kill Harry."

"And failed, that leads to complexities, Black. There are no other survives of that curse. We have no way of predicting what the results of that may be." Snape shoot back.

"What do you need Sirius to give permission for?" Harry interrupted.

"We think there may be a way to stop this connection," Dumbledore explained.

"If I have a link to Voldemort wouldn't it be good for us to know what he's up to?" Harry asked.

"You're a child, Potter." Snape countered. "Spying on the Dark Lord is a dangerous task, leave it to the trained adults."

"You'd know all about that Snivellus," Sirius said with a disapproving sneer.

"Yes Black, remind what you did for the last twelve years."

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore said silencing the squabble.

"So...what do you want me to do?" Harry asked looking from his godfather to his teacher, and finally his headmaster.

"If Sirius agrees, I would like you to begin Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape," Dumbledore answered.

"What's that?" "Why Snape?" Sirius demanded at the same time Harry asked his own question.

"If you hadn't noticed, Black," Snape interjected, "the headmaster is rather busy running a school and this absurd tournament your godson got himself wrapped up in. He has no time for trying to train
"Thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said with a disapproving glance over his glasses. "I am busy, that is true. What is more important, however, is Severus a far greater talent in the art than myself."

"Fine," Sirius reluctantly agreed.

"Eight o'clock Monday, Potter. If anyone asks you where you are, you are to tell them you are receiving additional training as preparation for the tournament." Snape instructed.

"Okay, but won't they wonder why Cedric isn't getting extra training," Harry said looking to Snape.

"Diggory is of age, you are three years junior, it is a way to demonstrate magic you have yet to encounter in class, that is all," Snape lied smoothly.

Harry wanted to know if he had come up with that on the spot, or had considered the question ahead of time.

"And Potter, no one is to know of these lessons, not even your little friends."

Harry gave a slow nod, "Yes sir."

Harry arrived in the Potions classroom five minutes early, but found no instructor. He waited for another three minutes before he started to second guess himself. Harry walked down the hall to the professor's office. He was there, sitting behind his desk, tapping his fingers impatiently on the wooden surface.

"You're late, Potter."

"Sorry, I went to the classroom, I thought we were meeting there," Harry said taking a seat in front of the desk."

"Very well, let us begin," Snape said standing. 

"What? I don't get some sort of explanation? I don't even know what Occlumency is," Harry protested.

Snape rolled his eyes, "It's Occlumency, Potter. It is the art of deflecting one's thoughts so an intruder is unable to know what one is thinking. It is a manner of keeping your thoughts private. Legilimency is often used to enter the mind of another. A skilled Occlumens can repel these attacks."

"Let me see if I understand, your are going teach me a way of stopping people from reading my mind," Harry summarized.

Snape rolled his eyes, "A completely unsubtle way, but if that is the only way you can understand it, so be it. I will try to penetrate your mind, you will try and block me. On the count of three. Three...two...one..." 

Harry was being shoved into the cupboard understand the stairs all of his hair, but his fringe shorn off...Ripper chasing him up a tree...Sirius coming to collect him at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters...
Harry fell back onto the dusty floor of the office.

Snape was rubbing his wrist. "Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex," he asked.

"I didn't know I had," Harry grumbled brushing the dust from his bum.

"You let me in too far," Snape concluded.

"Well, how am I supposed to stop you?" Harry snapped.

"Mind your tone, Potter. You need to push less painful memories forward while also forcing me out completely."

"I don't think I understand," Harry said.

"It is a matter of mental skill and determination. A time when your wonderful stubbornness can be put to use. It is not a skill acquired, nor perfected overnight. You will practice clearing your mind every night before sleep. You will work on Occluding, directing your thoughts once in the morning and again at night." Snape directed. "That will be it for tonight. I will know if you practiced, so make sure you do, Harry."

Harry did his best comply with the professor's orders, but his focus began to drift as the first task approached. He had no idea what he was going to face. Hagrid answered that question for him. He took him, Madam Maxime, the headmistress of Beauxbatons, and a snooping Karkaroff out to the pens, the pens where the creatures were being held. Harry's problem then became how to survive a close encounter with a dragon.

Harry's distress was clear to his professors. McGonagall excused him from class worried he might accidentally transform a classmate, not the bird into a basket. Moody held him after class. The man seemed to know what the task would have Harry facing. He suggested Harry play to his skills, what he meant by that.

"Damn it, Potter!" Snape snapped,"You were doing better than this a week ago. What is wrong with you tonight?"

"I don't want to be eaten by a dragon," Harry moaned flopping gracelessly to the floor.

"What in the name of Merlin are you on about, Potter?" Snape said glaring down at the downtrodden teen.

"The task is dragons," Harry explained. "How on earth am I supposed to get past a dragon?"

"You are a champion, you are supposed to figure that out for yourself." Snape reminded him.

"Well, I never wanted to be in this stupid thing. I just wanted to sit back and watch, cheer on Cedric or whoever Hogwarts champion was. Why can't I have a normal year?" Harry whined.

Snape offered a hand up, "I will not talk to you on the floor like a toddler recovering from a tantrum."

Harry took the hand and was pulled up effortlessly. He moved from sitting on the floor in a chair in front of the desk. "So what am I supposed to do against a dragon?"
Snape sighed, "I believe I just said you were to figure that out on your own. I will say this, a dragon's eyes are its weakest point, a Conjunctivitis Hex to them may allow you slip past unseen. This, however, may upset the animal, so be careful."

Harry nodded, "Professor Moody said I should play to my strengths, but I don't know what that means."

"You asked Moody about this matter?" Snape asked taking a seat across from Harry.

Harry shrugged, "Not really, he just sort of suggested it. He has to know what was coming. What strengths?"

"Other than your Gryffindor rashness and being more stubborn than an ill-tempered chimera," Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

Harry nodded.

Snape rolled his eyes, "You are the youngest Seeker in a century."

Harry frowned, "What...You mean I should try and fly past it?"

"It is merely an idea."

"But I'm only allowed my wand," Harry protested.

"Accio Headache Drought," Snape grumbled, "Even you should be able to manage a simple Summoning Charm."

"Errrr...Yeah, of course."

"Either way, you have three days, Potter. I suggest you get to work, the sooner the better. That will be all for tonight," Snape said raising from his chair.

"Yes sir," Harry said rising from his seat.

"Harry," Snape said stopping the boy as he opened the door.

Harry turned back, cocking his head to the side, "Sir."

"In case I do not see you before, the best of luck."

Harry gave him a warm smile, "Thank you, sir."

Harry rushed his way back to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione and Neville were working on their astronomy charts when Harry found them sitting in the corner.

"I know what I need to do," Harry said between gasped breaths. "I know how I'm going to get past the dragon." He explained about the what he and Snape discussed. He wasn't sure which was best, so Hermione suggested learning both. Anyways, Harry needed to learn the Summoning Charms for their exams. He didn't see the point arguing he didn't have to sit exams this year.
"Harry, you said Madame Maxime and Professor Karkaroff saw the dragons too," Neville said sitting forward.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "So Krum and Fleur are going to know...but, not Cedric. I need to tell him." Harry sank back into his chair, looking up the ceiling. "Is he even going to believe me?"

"I'm sure he will," Hermione reassured, "You should tell him tomorrow. We need to start practicing."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Mastering the Summoning Charm was easier than getting access to Cedric. He was always surrounded by his classmates or other Hufflepuffs, none of whom seemed too pleased to be in Harry's presence. In the end, Harry jinxed a tear into the boy's bag to get him alone. Cedric didn't want to believe him about the dragons, but he didn't know what else there was to do. Harry was glad that Snape made his suggestions. He ended up using the Summoning Charm to bring his Firebolt to him. He flew high to draw his dragon, the Hungarian Horntail, (the worst tempered of the lot according to Charlie Weasley) up and away from the clutch of eggs she sat on. He swooped down managing to grab the golden egg he was supposed to retrieve. He even got compliments from Krum and Bagman both professional Quidditch players while doing it too. Altogether, Harry was pretty pleased with the results. He was in second place for his efforts.

The party in the Common Room was even more riotous than the last. Harry nearly deafened his fellow Gryffindors by opening the egg. It was supposed to be a clue to the next challenge, but he didn't understand how. Maybe Seamus' suggestion they were to face a banshee was correct. Harry finally climbed the stairs up to his bed late into the night too full of butterbeer and sweets stolen from the kitchens. He smiled as he spotted the note sticking out from under his pillow.

A fine job nearly giving me heart failure, Potter. Try not to wait to solve this one at the last minute. SS
  P.S. Be glad I did not deduct points for your needless showmanship

Chapter End Notes

We've reached the halfway point of the story. Hope you are enjoying the journey so far.
"Harry when are you going to start trying to solve your egg?" Hermione asked several days after the first task.

"I've got ages, Hermione." Harry dismissed as he tucked into his plate of eggs and bangers.

"The second task is in February, Harry. That's two and a half months away. What if you have to brew a special potion that takes an extended amount of time? Remember it took us a month to brew the Polyjuice in second year."

"Hermione, the first task was dragons. You really think they would go from that to brewing?"

"I don't know," Neville interjected. "Professor Dumbledore said it was going to test your magical knowledge in all sorts of ways. Makes sense you might have to brew something."

"Great," Harry grumbled. "Snape would love that. Can you imagine if I do have to brew a potion?"

Hermione frowned in confusion. "I don't know what you're saying, Harry? You do fine in Potions."

"I do okay, well enough to get by without too many snarky comments. But he knows I don't like, that I hate how long it takes. If it is a potion, it'll probably have a hundred disgusting ingredients that I'll have to chop up, skin, crush with a silver blade, or some other rubbish." Harry elaborated with a particularly violent stab to a bit of egg.

"You never seemed to bothered by it during class," Neville observed.

Harry shrugged. "Wouldn't do me much use, we can't drop Potions until sixth year anyway."

"Still, where's this coming from?" Hermione asked placing a comforting hand over Harry's.

"Nowhere...just something Professor Snape said during our last lesson." Harry shrugged, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. For the first time since coming to Hogwarts, there were things going on with Harry he wasn't allowed to share with his friends. He thought he understood why Professor Snape didn't want him telling them. Still, Harry didn't like hiding things from the people he cared about. Neville and Hermione had been by his side since the first train ride from London. It felt like they deserved to know what was going on now.

"You know you can tell us anything, Harry?" Hermione said squeezing his hand.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not allowed to."

"Who won't allow you?" Neville asked looking concerned.

"Professor Snape, but it's nothing. It's just these lessons get inside your head and make your emotions run all high and things." Harry tried to explain.
"Maybe you could talk to Madame Pomfrey about?" Neville suggested.

"I'm fine," Harry insisted, "really."

"If you change your mind," Neville encouraged.

"Thanks, Neville. We better get a move on, you know how McGonagall is about being late."

Professor McGonagall ended class a little earlier than normal, so she could talk to them about something important, the Yule Ball, a traditional part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. It was to be held on Christmas night. All students fourth year and above were welcome to attend. Those who wished could bring a younger student may. The piece of information that really concerned Harry was he and the other champions were expected to open the dancing. Therefore, going stag wasn't an option for Harry.

The ball was probably why so many choose to stay for the holidays that year. It seemed like all anyone could talk about. It had been a week and Harry still didn't have a date. He didn't know who he wanted to ask or how to go about doing it. His godfather had given him the same advice the twins had, just walk up to the girl and ask her. Neither were any help on who to ask. Remus was slightly more useful in this regard, he was very understanding and suggested asking a friend, Hermione perhaps. It should be someone whose company he enjoyed.

"Hermione," Harry asked that evening over dinner.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Do you have a date for the Yule Ball?"

"Oh, Harry. I'm sorry, but I do." Hermione said.

"It's okay," Harry said,

Ron leaned over, "She's lying, I bet. Just doesn't want you to know nobody's asked her." If he was trying to say it softly enough that Hermione didn't hear, he failed miserably.

"For your information Ronald Weasley, somebody already asked me last week. Otherwise, I would have been very happy to accompany Harry." Hermione snapped at the ginger.

"Who then?"

"That's none of your concern." Hermione snapped her book shut and stormed off.

"That wasn't very nice, Ron," Harry said still looking to where his friend had gone.

Ron shrugged. "I still reckon she doesn't have a date."

Harry stared as the other boy went back to shoving his dinner into his face. He would have to find someone else to ask. He wasn't really friends with Lavender or Parvati, anyways Hermione told him Lavender already said yes to Seamus. Neville had come back beaming the first evening having asked and been accepted by Ginny. Harry felt slightly better when he heard he wasn't the only one that didn't have a date. Ron was still asking pretty much any girl he came across. The funniest one was when he tried asking Fleur Delacour. She had all but laughed in his face, mortified at his own acts
Ron had retreated back to the Tower complaining of being overwhelmed by her Veela powers.

Harry was getting increasingly anxious. He needed to ask someone, he didn't want to look like a fool in front of the whole school. Even now he still didn't know who he was going to ask. The following night he was walking back to Gryffindor Tower, ache and sweaty from his hour long lesson with Professor Snape when he spotted Luna standing on tip-toe trying to retrieve a violently green shirt from the top of a suit of armor.

"Let me help you with that," Harry said rushing forward. "Accio shirt."

"Thank you, Harry," Luna said accepting the rescued clothing item.

"It's no problem," Harry said pushing a lock of hair out of his eyes. "If it's yours, how did it get up there?"

"Some of my Housemates think I'm quite mad. They think it's funny to hide my things sometimes." Luna explained.

"You shouldn't let them do that. You should tell a teacher," Harry told her horrified.

Luna shook her head, golden hair falling into her eyes, "Oh no, it's all in good fun. But as I'm going home in a few days it's time to start collecting things."

"Going home?" Harry asked dumbly.

"For the holidays," Luna clarified.

"Right..." Harry agreed uneasily.

Luna started to skip back down the hall, lost in her own world once more. He made up his mind.

"Luna! Luna wait up?" Harry asked taking off after her.

She waited patiently for Harry to speak. Harry gulped awkwardly, still not saying a word. Luna cocked her head to the side as if looking for something others couldn't quite see.

Harry shifted his feet, "Err...do you...do you want to come to the Yule Ball with me?"

Luna smiled sweetly at him. "Yes."

Harry grinned. They said good night and Harry walked back up to the Gryffindor Tower in a much better mood than he left Snape's office. He found his friends sitting in front of the fire Ron and Neville in a rather intense game of chess. Hermione gave him a penetrating look.

"What has you so excited?" She asked pushing the ginger cat from her lap.

"What?" Harry asked, being drawn back to reality.

"You're grinning like a kneazle at the cream," Ron observed.

"Huh, oh, it's nothing. I just have a date to the Yule Ball." Harry said with a shrug.
"Great for you, mate. Now it's only me who doesn't have a date."

After Hermione's outburst in the Great Hall, he had stopped making comments about not believing Hermione had a date. It had only taken, Ginny and both the twins telling him off to do it. Harry still wasn't sure if Ron believed her, or he didn't want to hear about it from his siblings again.

"Who you going with?" Ron asked taking Neville's knight.

"Luna," Harry said stopping Crookshanks from swatting at the game board.

"Luna? You're taking Looney Lovegood? Ahhh.. geese mate... It might be better if you went stag."

"Don't call her that." Harry snapped.

"At least Harry has a date, Ronald. I don't see them lining up to go with you." Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, well, if they're all as mad as Looney Lovegood, I'm ok with that."

"That's a horrible thing to say," Neville said moving his queen into position, "Checkmate."

Ron looked down at the board, sighed and tipped his king. "You might think it's horrible, but you've never had he go off on you about blimpie care or whatever. She's completely mad."

"That doesn't mean you should talk about her that way." Neville insisted.

Ron rolled his eyes, "Whatever." He stormed off up the stairs to the boys' dormitory.

"Well, I'm glad you found somebody, Harry," Hermione said putting aside her book. "But you might want to be more like Neville and take Professor McGonagall's dance lessons more seriously. You do have to open the floor, remember?"

Harry groaned, "Yeah, I remember."

"Don't worry, I'll help you." Neville insisted.

Harry nodded, "Thanks."

Harry tried to hid his embarrassment when Dean, Seamus, and the Weasley twins found the two of them practicing a few days later. At least, we who it was the story wasn't as likely to get out of Gryffindor Tower. Harry was certain if Malfoy found out he would rather take another go at that dragon from the first task.

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Term came to an end for the holidays, not that you could tell by the number of people still in the castle. The professors who normally did a wonderful job of decorating the castle seemed to want to impress their visions by going even further this year. In addition to the traditional twelve Christmas trees, there were fairy lights, made of real fairies. The suits of armor were taught to sing carols as people passed by them.
Christmas morning arrived with a pair of green eyes staring into Harry's own. Dobby had come to present his gift to Harry, by leaning over the boy much to Harry's displeasure. The house elf was instructed to just poke him the next time, or something. His gift it turned out was a pair of socks he knitted himself, one red with broomsticks and the other green with snitches. Harry felt guilty that he hadn't thought to get the elf anything, so he quickly grabbed an old pair of Uncle Vernon's socks and gave those to Dobby. The elf didn't care they weren't wrapped, or an awful mustard yellow. Though, he did seem to be confused by them matching. Ron fixed that by giving him the new violet pair his mother sent him with his sweater.

Other than Dobby's socks, the mountain of presents bigger than Harry had ever seen before. There was the traditional Weasley sweater barring a roaring dragon across the chest and a box of treacle fudge from Mrs. Weasley as well. Hermione had gotten him a book, Quidditch Teams of Great Britain and Ireland. From Neville, he received a practice snitch. Sirius sent a useful little penknife that could unlock any door, or undo any knot. Remus had sent a large bar of Honeydukes Best Chocolate with Sirius' present. Hagrid had sent him a collection of sweets including Chocolate Frogs, Bertie Bott's and others. There was a small plain wrapped packet that Harry had a sneaking suspicious Dobby left behind. It contained a book on wizarding first aide.

Potter,

Since you continually insist nearly getting yourself killed I thought it wise if you have some idea of how to repair the inevitable damage. SS

Harry chuckled at the snarky dedication. He was glad everyone was too busy opening their own presents to notice his reaction. He didn't think Professor Snape would like the rest of his House knowing the man sent him Christmas presents.

Much of the morning was spent in the Tower people displaying their new gifts and playing games. Lunch was delicious with at least one hundred turkeys on the menu along with all the sides. Lunch was followed by an epic snowball fight organized by Fred and George. The twins built a huge fort to hide behind as they lobbed their ammunition at their opponents, which consisted mostly of Ravenclaws. Hermione left after a little, saying she needed to go and get dressed for the ball. Ron scoffed at that, he wanted to know why she needed three hours to get ready. Harry was hit in a well-thrown snowball from one of the Ravenclaw Beaters as he tried to say goodbye to her. Neville left a short while later, he wanted to look good for Ginny. He was hit in the back one snowball after the other for making that comment in front of three of her older brothers. Slowly more and more people left, heading back to the castle to get ready for the ball. Harry and the male Weasleys were the last to leave the field of battle.

Harry took a quick shower to warm up and get the bits of dirt and twigs that had come from the snowball fight. He hadn't had to worry about shaving yet so just went back to his dorm to get dressed. His dress robes were already laid out for him, they were an emerald green. Remus told him Mrs. Weasley had picked them out, she thought they would good well with his eyes.

Harry smiled thinking about his mother. Living with Sirius and Remus he had learned a lot more about James Potter. Before this summer, he had known he resembled his father a great deal. Both from the pictures he was given by their friends, but the frequent comments from anyone who had
known them. They always said the same thing, "he looked just like his father, except his eyes. He had his mother's eyes." He was starting to get sick of it if he were honest.

But knowing he looked like the man didn't tell him much who was as an actual person. It turned out James too got into a great deal of trouble at school. It wasn't exactly as dangerous as Harry, he never faced off Lord Voldemort until the night he died. No, his trouble was much more ordinary, skipping class, being out after hours, unsanctioned potion experiments in the back of the lab, and most often using magic in the halls. James and Professor Snape hadn't gotten along since they met on the train. Sirius and Remus never explained why.

Harry fumbled with the tie, unsure how to do the bowtie he was given by Remus to wear with his robes. He had shown Harry once the day before Harry was supposed to return to Hogwarts, but he couldn't remember any of the steps now. He left it hanging around his neck undone as he went downstairs first to the Common Room and then the Great Hall. He was supposed to met Luna at the entrance hall, but he didn't see her or Hermione. Neville and Ginny were standing in a corner talking. He waved and considered going over, but thought it would be too awkward.

"Ahhh... There you are, Potter." Professor McGonagall said coming to stand next to the teen. "You were the last champion to arrive."

"Sorry," Harry mumbled. "I didn't think I was late, but I couldn't get my tie done."

"You're not late," the headmistress reassured. "Now let me see about this tie." She moved to stand in front of Harry. Her old and spotted hands made quick work of it. "My word, you dashing Mr. Potter. Very much like..."

"My dad?" Harry guessed.

"Like a gentleman," she corrected. "I wish Lily and James were here to see you, Potter. They would be proud of you, I'm sure."

Harry fought back a blush, "Thanks, Professor."

She straightened back up, readjusting her hat, "You're welcome, Mr. Potter. The champions and their guests are to be at the doors to the Great Hall in five minutes."

"Yes ma'am, I'll be there as soon as I find Luna."

She nodded once more and hustled off to do whatever was expected of her at the moment. Harry craned his neck looking for his date. He didn't see her anywhere. He hoped Ron wasn't right and she wasn't wearing something completely mad like radishes in her ears like the first day he met her.

"Hullo Harry," she said behind him.

Harry spun around nearly losing his balance in his slippery dress shoes. "Hi Luna," he greeted his balance regained.

Ron wasn't right, Luna could dress appropriately it turned out. She wore a shimmery blue dress that brought out the light blue of her eyes. In her hair, she had two lovely pins that had butterflies whose wings beat.

"You look amazing," Harry finally said.
"Thank you, Harry."

"We should...we should get down there, Professor McGonagall already warned me not to be late."

Remembering what Remus and Professor McGonagall had shown them, Harry offered his arm to Luna. They walked over easily finding the other champions using Fleur's fancily done silver hair as a beacon. Harry looked around as they walked trying to find Hermione. He knew she wasn't lying about having a date, but she wasn't here as far as he could see.

"Have the nargles gotten to you Harry?" Luna asked as he continued to look around wildly.

"The what?"

"They fly into your head and make your brain go fuzzy."
Harry frowned, "What? I was trying to find Hermione."

"Hi Harry," the girl in the frilly pink gown said.

It took Harry a moment to realize it was his best friend. Her normally bushy brown hair was straightened and done up. She wore makeup too, not too much, just enough. She stood next to Viktor Krum, her arm linked with his.

"Wow Hermione," Harry said. "You look great."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Harry. Hello, you must be Luna."

"Hullo," Luna replied.

"Champions, this way," Professor McGonagall issued them off to a side room.

Mr. Bagman and Percy Weasley were there waiting for them.

"H'llo there Harry," Mr. Bagman said coming over and forcibly taking Harry's hand.

"Hi," Harry said awkwardly.

"Now," Mr. Bagman said turning to the rest of the group, "we're just waitin' for the rest of the guests to find their seats then you an' your lovely guests will be introduced. There's a special table set aside for you, Professor McGonagall will show you to it. Percy here will share a few remarks Mr. Crouch who was too ill to make it tonight, but he wishes you all well."

Harry and Luna were the last to be introduced. Everyone was already standing at their seats, they stood behind their chairs as Mr. Bagman and Percy completed their remarks. Harry was happy to follow Dumbledore's suit as they finally sat down to eat. Unlike any other meal Harry had eaten at Hogwarts, there were no trays of dishes. Instead, at each place stood a small menu. Harry watched as the headmaster spoke clearly to his place requesting his preferred dish.

Harry wondered what Hermione thought about this, it had to be a great deal of extra work for the house elves. He noted she didn't say anything about it at the moment, she was too busy discussing things about Durmstrang with Krum. Professor Karkaroff didn't seem to happy about that. He wanted to keep their school's secrets secret. Professor Dumbledore had Harry laughing when he told
a story about finding a room filled with chamber pots during one late night stroll. The man had been in the castle for decades, he had only found that room once. It was proof that Hogwarts had many secrets even from those that though they knew it best.

Dumbledore and Luna got into a conversation about merpeople. Harry wasn't sure if he could believe everything his companion had to say about the topic. She didn't like the merpeople who lived in the lake because of the way they treated the giant squid. Dumbledore agreed with her about the treatment of the squid and promised to have a word with their chief the next time they spoke. Harry wondered if the headmaster was telling her the truth, he hoped he was but there was no way to know for certain.

Dinner was delicious and Harry was content to sit and listen to the Weird Sisters, the musical entertainment for the night play, sadly he and the other school champions were to open the dancing. Harry was just waiting to make a mistake, he knew Malfoy would be watching for him to make a mistake. It was a good thing Luna was a much better dancer than Harry. He didn't step on her toes too many times.

Harry lead Luna back to their seats after the first dance. He breathed a sigh of relief he was done for the night. Luna watched as the other couples danced.

"You're not a very good dancer," Luna stated.

Harry brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. "Yeah, sorry. I'm great on a broom, but I don't know...it's like it's like I've got two left feet."

Luna gave him a hard look, "You're thinking too much."

"Oh yeah?" Harry asked.

Luna nodded.

"Do you want to give it another go?"

"No," Luna said slowly.

"Do you want to take a walk outside?" Harry asked, pulling at the collar of his dress robes.

Luna pulled his hand away from his collar and led him outside. Harry felt much better being out of the stuffy air of the overheated Great Hall. It was cooler than it was inside, but the teachers must have extended Warming Charms to the elaborate gardens that now stood in the front drive. Luna kept hold of Harry's hand as they walked. Harry hoped she didn't notice the sweaty state his palm was in. They turned a corner and stopped, startled by the raised voices.

"It's getting darker," the first voice insisted.

"That's Karkaroff," Harry whispered wanting to hear just a bit better. "Who's he talking to?"

"Don't listen, Harry, that's rude," Luna said tugging his hand gently to start walking the opposite direction.

Harry ignored her stepping closer toward the voices.
"This isn't the place Karkaroff! Anyone could hear you, you dolt!"

"And Professor Snape," Harry told Luna.

She tried to tug them away again. Harry refused to move once again.

"You won't speak to me, Severus. What am I supposed to do?" Karkaroff demanded. "He's growing stronger you can't deny it. He is coming back. Look at your arm, Severus!"

"I am not discussing this with you, Karkaroff," Snape said. There were footsteps coming closer and there Snape was standing before Harry and Luna the anger clear in his sallow features.

"Potter, that's ten points from Gryffindor for eavesdropping," Snape snapped, "and the same for Ravenclaw."

"We weren't," Harry protested.

Snape quirked an eyebrow up. "I see. Is that true, Miss Lovegood?"

Harry gave her a pleading look.

"Yes Professor," Luna said, "We were just walking past and heard you."

"Ten more points for lying, Potter. Come with me, boy," Snape said placing a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Errrr... bye, Luna," Harry called as the man marched him back toward the castle

Harry practically had to jog to keep up with the Potions Master's quick pace. They didn't stop and Snape didn't remove his hand from Harry's robes until they reached the professor's office.

"Tell me all you heard," Snape demanded.

Harry shook his head. "We didn't hear anything."

"Don't lie to me, Harry."

"I'm not," Harry insisted. "We were just walking past, we heard Karkaroff saying something about it getting darker and you not wanting to talk about it. That's it."

Snape gave him a familiar penetrating stare.

"I promise," Harry told him, he locked his eyes with the man. If he wanted to make sure he was telling the truth by Legilimency he could.

Snape nodded after a long moment. If he had Legilimenced Harry, Harry hadn't felt the familiar intrusion of the man's mind in his own. Harry wondered what that was about. The man believed him, did he trust Harry was telling the truth?

"I do not want you anywhere near Karkaroff," Snape finally said.

"Okay," Harry said taking a seat in his usual spot. "I don't really see him."
"Be that as it may, be careful, Harry." Snape began to pace the length of the small office.

Harry waited for him to speak. When the professor didn't Harry had to say something.

"Was he talking about... that thing on your arm? Voldemort's symbol?"

"Don't say that name," Snape snapped instinctively. He stopped pacing to make eye contact with Harry. "He was indeed referring to the Dark Mark. He fears the return of the Dark Lord. He betrayed the Dark Lord and his fellow Death Eaters at the end of the last war. Many have never forgiven him for his actions. He believes he will be killed for these actions if he were to return."

"Will he?" Harry asked.

Snape nodded, "It is highly possible, however, fleeing from the Dark Lord will only guarantee his demise."

"Then why run?" Harry asked.

"The man is a coward. He does not wish to face the consequences of his actions."

"So he's going to die either way?"

"It is almost certain," Snape confirmed.

"That's stupid."

"The Dark Lord does not tolerate disloyalty. It is this fear of vengeance or death that will bring back many of the followers that may have otherwise moved on in their beliefs." Snape explained.

"Right," Harry agreed not completely understanding.

"There are some former followers who have a great deal to lose if the Dark Lord returns. They will no longer be free to peruse their own aims, but be servants once more to another's will," Snape clarified.

"Okay," Harry agreed.

"You need not concern yourself with that now, Potter. It is late, you should return to your tower."

There wasn't a curfew tonight but Harry knew the man wasn't making a suggestion. If Harry was up in his dorm he was safe.

Harry sighed, "Good night, sir."

"Harry, you would do well apologizing to Miss Lovegood in the morning," Snape suggested as the boy made to open the door.

"Apologize for what?" Harry asked.

"That your desire to eavesdrop lost her House ten points and you abandoned her so early in the night," Snape replied as if were obvious.
"I didn't abandon her. You dragged me off." Harry stumbled.

"Miss Lovegood may not share your feelings about it. You should do your best to rectify the situation." Snape continued. "Misunderstanding and hurt feelings can doom a relationship, if you explained what happened, she is more likely to accept your apologies."

"I didn't... We're not... We're just friends..." Harry stammered a blush creeping up his neck.

"If you ever desire it to be more, take heed to my warning, Potter. Now away with you, I must return to that travesty of a dance," Snape said with a heavy sigh. The two walked together until they reached the ground floor.

"Good night sir," Harry said before turning to continue up the stairs. He was surprised to find he wasn't the only one in his dorm when he arrived. Ron was already snoring in his four-poster as Harry changed for bed. Ron must not have been enjoying himself that much if he was already in bed, it was barely after midnight after all. Harry laid down but had a hard time falling asleep. Snape's words kept playing in his head. Karkaroff fearing for his life, Death Eaters not wanting to return to Voldemort's service, was Snape giving him dating advice?

Harry was one of the earliest up the next morning. He ate breakfast by himself in nearly an empty Great Hall. He didn't see Hermione or Neville until after lunch. Apparently, both had come back sometime around dawn. Hermione's hair was back to its normal puffiness, she admitted she had used a lot of products to make it look like that. She could do it every day, but it wasn't worth the effort.

"Oh no," she sighed setting down her paper between the three of them.

"What?" The boys asked together.

"Rita Skeeter," Hermione said spotting a column.

Harry rolled his eyes, "What did she say this time?"

Hermione scanned down the article. "She mentions I am dating Viktor."

"Are you really?" Harry asked.

Hermione blushed.

"Good for you, Hermione," Neville said.

"She goes on to talk about Harry being dragged into the castle by Professor Snape," Hermione continued.

Harry frowned, "How does she know about that? The only person around was Luna. She wouldn't talk to Skeeter."

"What did Professor Snape want?"

Harry shook his head, "I didn't do anything, just he thought I heard something I shouldn't have."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.
"It's nothing, Hermione. What did Skeeter say that was so bad?"
Hermione leaned forward to read the exact words of Skeeter's article about how Hagrid being half-giant, the son of the notorious giantess, Fridwulfa. From there she went on to make speculations about his character, including his fondness for brutal beasts.

"We should go and see him," Harry suggested at once. "He should know we don't care who is mum was or what he might be. I know what it's like to be embarrassed by your family."

"That's not really a fair comparison, Harry." Hermione chided.

"You've never really met them. Trust me, Hermione, they're just about as bad as being related to a giant. At least giants have an excuse why they don't act like decent humans; my aunt and uncle never did." Harry said bitterly.

"I don't... I don't... But how could she know that?" Neville stuttered.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "Harry's right we should go after breakfast."

"If it's true, who would he trust with that?" Neville asked. "Did you know, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't care, but he didn't tell me."

"Did you ever see her yesterday?" Hermione asked. "She doesn't seem to like Viktor very much."

"Yeah, she was trying to talk to Dumbledore or trying to, but he ignored her to dance with Madame Maxime," Harry told them. "I didn't see her after that. Luna and I went for a walk, then Snape sent me to bed."

"What did you hear?" Hermione asked exasperatedly.

Harry shrugged, "Karkaroff is scared of Vol-You-Know-Who coming back. He wants to run away."

"How can you say that isn't important, Harry?"

"I don't know." Harry huffed. "Professor Snape just wanted to make sure I stayed out of Karkaroff's way. I think he's scared Karkaroff might use me to make things better with You-Know-Who or something."

"Harry, how can you sound so casual about that?"

"He can't do anything to him here, Hermione." Neville pointed out, "not with Dumbledore here."

"Her-mo-nee," Viktor said waddling up to the Gryffindor table.

"Hi Viktor," Hermione said blushing again. "We can talk later."

"Have fun," the boys said letting her go.

"So, how were things with Ginny," Harry asked.

Hermione wasn't the only one to blush that morning. She came back a few minutes later having changed her plans with Viktor to later that day so they could go and see their distressed friend.
Their visit to Hagrid’s was one of the hardest ever. Hagrid had answered the door half-drunk. He had thrown himself on Harry and Neville weepingly messily into the boys' cloaks. He had told them a little about his early life, showing them the only photo he had of his tiny father. Yet by the end of the visit, none of them had a better idea how Skeeter could have found out. Hagrid refused to believe Madame Maxime would say anything about it. The woman had even more to lose than Hagrid. She might deny it, but there was no doubt she was like him after all.

With the holidays past and term beginning again, February was starting to feel a lot closer. Harry was no closer to solving the egg. Every time he tried, it let out the same blood-curdling screams. If he didn’t solve it soon he wouldn't have time to prepare for the upcoming task. He wished he had listened to Hermione and started earlier.

Harry made his way down to Snape's office like he did every Thursday night. His Occlumency lessons were going better, but Snape could still break in. The man was frustrated with Harry's lack of progress. Harry tried to argue it was the upcoming holidays had him distracted with them past, that was no longer going to work, not that it worked all that well before.

"Potter," Professor Snape greeted as Harry entered his office without knocking.

"Sir," Harry said taking a seat waiting patiently the for man to finish with the papers he was working on before his arrival.

"I trust you have been practicing during our time off," Snape said setting his quill down.

"Errr..."

"I see. What is your excuse this time?"

"I didn't..." Harry sighed. "I don't have one."

"Potter, I am not doing this simply for my amusement." He said with a heavy sigh. "If the Dark Lord tries to access your mind this could not only save your life but that of others."

Harry frowned, "More than my life?"

"Yes Potter, you know a number of things the Dark Lord would care to know."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

Snape rolled his eyes, "I believe you will find that defeats the purpose of this exercise, Potter. You have more than Drooble's Best Blowing Gum between your ears if you put you mind to it."

Harry tilted his head to the side unsure if the man had just insulted his intelligence or not. He pushed aside that comment to think about Snape meant about knowing things.

"You mean your life," Harry said after a long minute. "That's what you meant when you came after the Quidditch Cup?"
"It is more than my life, Harry. If the Dark Lord returns, truly returns, as strong or stronger as the night he time slot to cast that Killing Curse, many lives will be at risk. A war is not fought, nor won by a single individual. A war will occur when the Dark Lord returns." Snape stood, "Enough of this for now. You need to work on your lamentable Occlumency skills. Try and direct more innocuous thoughts and feelings to the surface. You need to keep the most important ones in the deepest part of your mind."

"Yes sir," Harry said standing as well.

Harry did better than he expected, he was able to throw off the professor's assault every time. Snape wasn't as pleased with how long it took Harry for just that. He was also able to get access to some of Harry's memories.

"Whose dog was that," Snape said offerings Harry a hand up after his final assault.

"Aunt Marge," Harry said rubbing his sore bottom.

"Is that not the woman you inflated last summer?"

"Yeah, but that was before I started Hogwarts, Dudley's ninth birthday, I think."

"I see," Snape said taking in the boy, "so your attack on her I have to assume was not just fueled by the comments of that night."

Harry shrugged. "She was talking about my mum and dad being worthless drunks. That's when she started blowing up like a balloon. She spent the week before insulting and spying on me. I dealt with that fine."

"Yet her comments about Lily drove you to break the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery?"

" Didn't you hear? She was insulting my mum and dad. She was saying mum was like a dog, that she was underbred, or some bollocks." Harry fumed.

Snape nodded once again. "You should realize by now, the world is an unfair place, Harry. People will say and do things that are unjust. It may be about yourself or that of your parents. That, however, do not give you excuse to illegally hex them."

"I know all that," Harry sighed. "I told you when I came to Spinner's End, it was an accident. I lost my temper and it just happened. I didn't use my wand or anything."

"That is no better, Harry. You must learn to control your thoughts and feelings, it may be the difference between your life and death. It is nearly curfew, I will see you in class." Snape said returning to his desk.

Harry shook his head at the odd dismissal, "Good night, sir."

"Potter," Snape said not bothering to look away from his marking.

Harry headed back toward the Tower via the library. He needed to get a book for his Divination assignment. He would, as he always did, give it a proper try before making up his answers. Professor
Dumbledore said the woman wasn't a complete fake, but as far as the headmaster knew, she may have only had two real visions. That wasn't really a good percentage if you asked Harry.

Harry made his way down the Divination aisle running his finger down the spines of texts. Finally, he spotted the one he was looking for. He walked to the counter to checkout, when he saw Cedric working at a table with what Harry assumed were some of his fellow Hufflepuffs. The older boy waved at Harry. Harry returned it uneasily. Madame Pince handed Harry back his book, but he stopped seeing Cedric hold up a finger.

The older boy joined Harry at the counter, he motioned them to walk out. Harry frowned, but followed out into the hall. They walked down the corridor stopping in front of a snow covered window.

"I heard Snape's giving you some extra help," Cedric said looking over to Harry.

Harry shrugged, "Not with the tournament, just stuff I haven't got to do in class yet since..."

"Since you're a fourth year," Cedric finished.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"From what I heard he doesn't like you all that much. He must love having to help the famous Harry Potter."

"Professor Dumbledore asked him, I reckon nobody can really say no to Dumbledore." Harry craned his neck to look up at the taller teen. "That's not why you wanted to talk to me, is it? I promise you Snape would never help me cheat."

Cedric shook his head, "No, have you figured out your egg yet?"

"What?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Have you figured out your egg?"

Harry shook his head, still too shocked to speak.

"Well you helped me out, so I should do the same. I would've been dead if it wasn't for you." Cedric said seriously. "Take a bath."

"What?" Harry managed to ask.

"Take with you to a bath, you can even use the Prefects' Bath. The password is 'pine fresh'." Cedric clarified. He looked down at his watch. "You better get going, you'll be out after hours in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Cedric," Harry said shifting the book from one hand to the other.

Cedric smiled in response, "Now we're even."

Harry nodded and headed down the hall. He sighed as he had been very clear with what was coming with the other boy. How was he repaid, "take a bath"? How was that supposed to help? Still, it was further than he had gotten before. He would have to go out after hours and make extra
Sure Professor Snape didn't catch him. The man was already uncomfortable with Karkaroff and the others from Durmstrang being around him during the day.

Harry decided he would have to wait until sometime early next week, this close to the weekend there would be too many people patrolling.

"How was your lesson," Hermione asked handing him a green Headache Draught.

"Fine," Harry said slugging it back in one gulp, grimacing at the foul taste.

"Seamus was asking if you solved your egg yet," Neville informed him.

Harry shook his head.

"That's what I told him."

"You really should be working on it, Harry." Hermine chided.

"I am," Harry told her, "I have a clue what it's about."

"Oh," Hermione looked up hopefully.

"Er...well...I don't want to discuss it just yet..." Harry said scratching the back of his neck. "Wait? Weren't you having dinner with Krum tonight?"

Neville snorted clearly amused at the obvious redirect.

"We did. It was fine until Ron came barging in on us while we were studying in the library." Hermione said with a blush.

Harry frowned. "Why would he care who you're studying with?"

"He was going about me betraying you," Hermione explained. "He thinks I shouldn't be dating somebody from Durmstrang since they are competing against you or something."

Harry groaned. "I'll talk to him, don't worry. Honestly, Hermione, I don't care who you date."

Hermione smiled, "I know. Thank you, Harry."

"Anytime, Hermione," Harry said settling down to work on Trelawney's latest assignment.

Harry waited until late on Monday night to head down to the Prefect's Bathroom. He had his egg in his backpack. The Marauders Map was open to make sure he didn't bump into any professors or others who happen to be awake and roaming the halls. His walk down to the bathroom was slow, it seemed like every professor was out tonight. Harry wondered why Mr. Crouch was at the castle so late. He must have been visiting Professors Dumbledore and Snape since he was in the dungeons.

Harry had never seen a bathtub as big as the one in the Prefects' Bathroom. There were swimming pools that were smaller he was sure. He used a number of the taps, each creating a different smelling or looking bubble. Actually solving his egg came with a little help from Luna at Christmas dinner and Moaning Myrtle. He would have an hour to get back
something from the merpeople in the hour time slot, or it would be lost forever. Now all he had to do was figure out how to breathe underwater for an hour.

Harry drained the tub after he was sure Moaning Myrtle was gone, he wrapped a towel firmly around his waist and dried off. He had a lot of research ahead of him he was sure. At least Hermione would leave him alone now. He grabbed the egg and Invisibility Cloak putting it on once more. The Marauders' Map showed his path to the castle was clear.

Harry watched the map, Mr. Crouch was coming right towards him. Harry tripped falling into the gap of the stair Neville always forgot to jump. His bag flipped over sending the golden egg crashing down the stairs, popping up letting out its ear-splitting screams. Harry's only relief was he was still covered by the Invisibility Cloak. He struggled, trying to get out of the gap. The screaming stopped, Harry turned to see who had closed it. It was Professor Snape, his black eyes casting around to find Harry. A second set of footsteps came down the hall, there was no mistaking, them. Professor Moody appeared around the corner an instant later.

"What are you doing here Snape?" Moody demanded.

"I was on my typical patrols, Moody. I was drawn by the screaming," Snape said snidely, showing the ex-Auror the retrieved egg.

"Give it here, Snape. I'll be seeing Potter in class tomorrow."

"There's no way to know which champion this belongs to you paranoid..."

"Mind your tongue you Death Eater scum," Moody shot back. "I don't know what you've done to convince Dumbledore, but I know who you are." Moody looked up at the stairs once more.

Harry waited for a few minutes making sure the footsteps had faded before pulling back the hood of his cloak. Snape shook his head as he leaned over and put his arms under the teen's pits to remove him from where he was stuck. "Potter would be disappointed in you boy."

Harry stood there uncomfortably in the Potions Master's presence unsure what to say.

"What were you thinking?" Snape demanded.

"I..."

"How many times have I told you not to go out in the room at night?" Snape said his face inches from Harry's.

"I was trying to solve my egg," Harry explained.

"And you couldn't do that before curfew?"

Harry shook his head, "I was... I needed a bathtub...and not to be distributed..."

"So you broke into the Prefects' Bath?"

"I didn't break in," Harry said lamely looking at his slippered feet.

"Harry, that's not what's important," Snape all but sighed.
Harry looked up through his lashes, "I know. But when was I supposed to get to us the bath? We only have showers in the dorm."

"And you didn't think to ask your Head of House? I assure you, Professor McGonagall would have accommodated your request, Potter."

"Sorry," Harry mumbled.

"That does me little good if you get yourself killed, Potter." Snape paused, Harry could tell he was collecting himself. "I will escort you back to your dorm. I will see you this evening for the first night of a week's detention."

"Yes sir," Harry sighed. He should have known to expect that.

Hermione and Neville agreed with Snape when he told them what happened over breakfast.

"Do you have an idea of what you're going to use to get the thing back?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head, "I guess I was going to start looking for charms or something like that this afternoon."

"You could do that, but why not just use gillyweed?"

"What's that?" Harry asked. Sometimes Neville's passion for plants had its benefits.

Harry knocked on the office door.

"Enter," Professor Snape said not looking up from his papers.

Harry shifted slightly uncomfortable.

"What do you need, Potter?"

"Can I have some gillyweed?"

Snape set his quill down. "Why do you require that particular ingredient?"

"It's for the task tomorrow," Harry explained.

"And you did not to ask before tonight because?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I tried ordering some by owl post, but they wouldn't send it. I don't know what else to do." Harry explained with a huff.

"My word, Harry Potter thinking ahead. I have no idea why an apothecary might have failed to fill your request. Follow me," Snape said rising from his desk.
Harry followed the man into the restricted potions cupboard.

"If you are asking me for ingredients I can assume you and your little friends are not the ones pillaging my cupboard for supplies," Snape said pushing aside glass jars to retrieve the appropriate one.

"Supplies for what?" Harry said as he read the labels of unfamiliar ingredients.

"Polyjuice," Snape opening a jar. "Someone has taken boomslang skin and bicorn horn from this cupboard over the last several months. You three aren't trying your hand at it again? Miss. Granger has learned her lesson in brewing above her level."

"The potion was fine, she just used a cat hair on accident." Harry protested.

"Indeed," agreed Snape looking at the boy in the dark confines of the space.

"We aren't doing it," Harry reassured. "We were trying to figure out who the Heir of Slytherin was in second year. Why would we do it now?"

"I would suggest you stop speaking now if you ever wish to be a member of the Quidditch team again."

"Huh?"

"If you incriminate yourself further you will be spending every Saturday for the next three year helping Mr. Filch with every dirty job he can think of." Snape threatened softly.

"You can't do that." Harry protested, "That was years ago."

"Try me, Potter."

Harry stopped speaking.

"Good boy. Now how long do you think you will need to breathe under water?"

Harry said nothing.

"It is polite to speak when asked a question, Potter."

"Err...we have an hour to get to what they've taken and get back to the surface," Harry replied.

"Very well," Snape handed him a handful of slimy grey weeds that too closely resembled rattails for Harry's liking. "This should give you eighty minutes, give or take ten minutes, just in case it takes longer."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said smiling up at the man. It was so weird how the man could go from threatening him to put him in detention for years to make sure he had a little bit of extra protection. Something about what he was thinking must have shown on his face.

"It is for my own sake, Potter. I have no desire to retrieve you from the bottom of the Black Lake. I'm sure if anything were to go wrong the mutt you call your godfather would put the blame solidly
on my shoulders."

Harry fought back a laugh, "Yeah, he would. Still, thank you, sir."

Snape nodded, "Try and not get yourself killed, Potter."

Harry nodded. "I'll do my best."

Snape shook his head leading him out of the cupboard. "Off with you, you insufferable Gryffindor brat."

Harry made his way upstairs back to his room. He actually felt okay about with what tomorrow might bring. He woke up groggy the next morning the weak February light streaming through the windows. He rolled over, looking at the clock on the bedstand. It was a little over an hour before he was supposed to be at the lake. He should probably have something to eat now if he was going to eat before the challenge. Aunt Petunia always yelling at Dudley not to going to swimming until half an hour after eating? Or was it an hour? Oh well, he was hungry, he was going to have a bit of breakfast.

Harry got dressed and walked down to the Great Hall. He thanked all his well-wishers. It was only when he was finishing that he realized he had seen Neville or Hermione at all this morning.

"Hullo Harry," Luna said coming and sitting next to him.

"Hi Luna," Harry said still looking for his missing friends.

"You're distracted," Luna said watching him.

"Yeah," Harry admitted, "Sorry, I was just looking for Hermione and Neville."

"They're not here." She stated as if it was obvious.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I saw them walking with Professor Dumbledore early this morning."

Harry frowned. Where could they be? He couldn't imagine them not coming to cheer him on. Wait they were walking with Dumbledore. "Were they going to the lake?"

Luna cocked her head to the side.

"Dumbledore took them to the lake, that's what we're going have to retrieve from the merpeople. It's not a thing, but a person," Harry explained.

"Do you have to rescue both?"

Harry shook his head, "I don't know. Maybe?"

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said coming down the aisle between the tables.

Harry stood, "Coming Professor."
"Harry," Luna said coming with him.

"What is it, Luna?"

She passed him a small odd shaped lump, of something Harry didn't recognize. "It's for good luck."

"Uhhh...Thanks, Luna," Harry shoved the thing into his pocket. She walked beside him. Harry was not sure what to say.

"Through there, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall instructed as they arrived at a white tent on the lakeshore.

"I'll be cheering for you," Luna told him.

Harry nodded and headed in, the other champions were all standing in bathrooms waiting for the task to begin. Harry disappeared behind the partition to change into the provided swimsuit. He was glad to see it had a pocket and a wand holster. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with his gillyweed or his wand as he swam to the bottom of the lake.

"Hello all," Mr. Bagman came bustling into the room. "It's a wonderful morning. I hope each of you has figured out a strategy for today's task. Each of you has a hostage waiting for you at the bottom of the lake. You are to retrieve them within and return to the surface in the allotted hour. The person who comes back the fastest will score the highest."

Harry nodded along as Mr. Bagman spoke. He noticed it was not Mr. Crouch with him, but again, Percy. Mr. Crouch must have been very sick to miss judging the actual task.

"Percy," Harry said getting the young man's attention.

Percy looked over at the bespectacled boy, "Oh, hello Harry."

"Is Mr. Crouch still ill," Harry asked.

Percy looked uncomfortable, "Yes, I'm afraid he is. He's still working very hard from home of course. He sends owls every morning at least, if not several during the day. He wishes he could be here, of course. As his deputy, I was charged to represent the Department of International Cooperation."

"Harry, we're waiting for you to start," Mr. Bagman said coming back into the tent.

"Sorry," Harry apologized as he and Percy hustled to join the rest.

Mr. Bagman announced to the crowd that at the sound of the whistle all four champions would enter the water to retrieve whatever person they lost. That would be the start of the hour time limit. Harry stretched his muscles as best he could remember from physical education in primary school. He really wished Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had paid for him to take swimming lessons like they did in for Dudley.

The whistle blew Harry felt like an idiot walking into the water, no obvious magic in use. The gillyweed was rubbery and tasted like old licorice. Neville hadn't said exactly how he would know when it had taken effect. Harry just stood hip deep in the chilly water, trying not to shiver as he
chewed, finally swallowed. Harry could tell the instant it was in effect his head ached from the lack of oxygen. He brought up a webbed hand to touch the newly formed gills on the sides of his neck. He dove. Everything disappeared in the cloudy water, all sounds of the crowd, the cold, his sense of time. He still had a watch (an abandoned birthday present of Dudley's) but it wasn't waterproof apparently. It had stopped working as he entered the lake.

Harry swam down not sure exactly where he was going. He had to fight of grindylows on his way down. The merpeople looked nothing like the one in the painting in the Prefects' Bath. They wouldn't let Harry collect Neville and Hermione. He was only supposed to take Neville. Hermione was there for Krum. The Bulgarian showed up several long minutes after Harry, cutting Hermione free after Harry handed him a sharp rock before he accidentally bit Hermione in two with his transfigured shark's head. Cedric too came and collected his person, Cho Chang, the sixth year Ravenclaw Seeker.

Time was running out and Fleur had yet to show up. Harry couldn't just leave the little girl down here. She couldn't be more than eight or so. He ignored the merpeople's orders to leave her and cut her free bring her with him and Neville back to the surface. He was very glad the professor made sure he had enough gillyweed to last longer than the hour. It was much harder to swim carrying two unconscious people with him.

The last of the gillyweed wore off as Harry broke the surface. The little girl, Harry guessed she was Fleur's sister started to panic. Neville had no trouble taking hold of her and bringing her back to the shore. Harry was exhausted and wished someone would bring him back. He managed to get back to shore before collapsing on the muddy bank. He didn't care what the judges decided.

Hermione sat with Krum a little way away. They seemed to be having a very intense conversation from the look on his friend's face. He would have to ask her about that. Fleur was on the other side speaking in very fast French. She had thanked Harry and Neville for saving the girl, her sister, Gabrielle. Neville was wrapped in a blanket sitting next to Harry not saying anything. Harry appreciated the silence, he knew that he would be mobbed by the press, his classmates, and anyone else who wanted to know about what happened down in the lake. Harry was half asleep when Neville jostled him to inform him that he and Cedric were tied for first place. He had lost points for coming back after the hour time limit, but the merpeople informed the judges how Harry arrived first and refused to return until all the hostages were collected. He grinned proudly trying to mentally compose his next letter to Sirius. His godfather and Remus would want to know how he did in the task. Harry also wanted to ask what they knew about Mr. Crouch. It seemed odd to Harry the man would miss something as important as one of the Triwizard Tasks. And to send Percy, a brand-new employee to the Ministry, one who he confused the name of multiple times at the Quidditch World Cup, that didn't sit right either.

Harry wished he could call them like he had been able to at the Burrow. It would take days for Hedwig to come back with their response to all of Harry's questions. What else was there to do? Harry was still in a great mood when he arrived for Occlumency lessons the next evening.

"Yes, yes, Potter, you did very well yesterday. That idiotic stunt didn't cost you. It may only cost your life in the future." Snape said as Harry took a seat.

"Huh?" Harry said taking his usual seat.

"What if the time limit had meant life or death? Your insistence on saving everyone could have gotten Longbottom killed."
"So I should have let Fleur's sister die?" Harry demanded.

"No, but you need to think about the consequences of your actions." Snape clarified. "What did the mutt have to say?"

"I don't know yet, Hedwig hasn't come back with his letter," Harry admitted. "I wish I could call him."

"After our session, you may use my fireplace. I need to speak to the wolf anyway. This is only tonight," Snape stressed.

Harry grinned, "Thank you."

The lesson was one of the best Harry had ever had. He had managed to force Snape out of his mind and even penetrate the older man's memories for an instant. Harry didn't know or understand exactly what he saw in his mind, but he recognized the location at the house on Spinner's End. Harry guessed the yelling man must have been Snape's father, a cowering woman protecting the small boy, Snape's mother.

Sirius and Remus listened excitedly as Harry recounted the entire task in great detail. Snape provided biting commentary along the way. It was only afterward Harry remember what he wanted to discuss with his godfather. Harry explained how Mr. Crouch was still missing from the task, but he had been on the map. Why would he be at the castle late at night, but fail to attend something as important as the Triwizard Tournament?

Sirius didn't have an answer. Neither he nor Snape liked the man, who had been highly involved with the Death Eater trials at the end of the last war. Sirius was never given a chance to defend himself, whereas Snape was only saved from the Dementor's Kiss by Dumbledore personally vouching for him. Both Sirius and Snape agreed something must be wrong with such a driven man to miss something like the tournament.

The Snape and Sirius disagreed however on how Harry should protect himself. Sirius wanted Harry to spend more time with Mad-Eye Moody. The old man maybe a paranoid nutter, but he was the most talented Auror the department had ever seen. Sirius ignored Snape's misgivings about the man blaming them on his prejudice developed as a Death Eater.

In other news, Remus told Harry they planned to move to Sirius' old family house in London during the summer holidays. Harry would get to help make the place the home it never was to Sirius. Harry knew that probably meant a lot of cleaning and other menial jobs, but somehow Remus made the prospect of spending his summer cleaning house not sound too bad. Now all he had to do was survive this last task and he could go see his new home.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my story. If you have a second could you please take a two-question survey about the length of chapters.
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/FG35BVT

Thanks so much,
Stump_Pan
February turned into March, then April. Harry continued to work with Professor Snape on his Occlumency at least one night a week. Any detention he earned during class were turned into extra lessons.

Harry had gone with the twins on the most recent Hogsmeade weekend since Neville was going with Ginny and Hermione was with Krum. Harry thought about asking Luna but backed out at the last moment (so much for legendary Gryffindor courage). In a way, Harry was glad he hadn't brought Luna. Rita Skeeter spent the entire day buzzing around the village trying to come up with new gossip about Harry or the others competing in the tournament.

Skeeter created a nonsense story about Hermione's rejection of Harry for an older, more talented, star. The article had run in some of the women's magazines. Hermione had received some nasty letters in response to this, including burns from undiluted Bubotuber pus. Harry promised he would hit her the next time he saw her and those stupid bejeweled glasses.

After the news broke about Hagrid, Dumbledore had banned the reporter from the school grounds. Yet she seemed to have a way of getting past the headmaster's declaration, as she was continuing to publish new columns that were too accurate for her not to be around the castle. Snape received several Howlers one morning when Skeeter reported Harry had detention with the man for being out five minutes after curfew. The man cared not, he simply incinerated as soon as the unlucky bird dropped its missive, never giving them a chance to spew whatever the message was inside.

With April came another meeting of the champions, this time down on the Quidditch Pitch. The once perfectly manicured lawn was now covered in long snakes of three foot or so high hedges. Mr. Bagman informed them that the last task was to take place the last day of exams (for the rest of the school). Since Harry and Cedric were tied they would enter at the same time, Krum five minutes later, and Fleur another five after Krum.

"Potter," Krum called out to Harry, slowed to let the other boy catch up.

"Herm-own-ninny speaks of you often," Krum said walking back toward the castle.

"Uhhhh...yeah...we're friends..."Harry said nervously.

"Di paper, dis Skeeter woman, she says you and Herm-own-nny are more," Krum said stopping at the edge of the forest.

Harry shook his head. "We're not. Hermione's great, she fantastic. But she's...she's sort of like a sister to me."

"You do not love her den?" Krum clarified.

"Not like that," Harry confirmed. "She's just a friend."

"Den you do not mind her seeink me?"
Harry shrugged, "It's her choice. I don't think she'd care who I was dating."

"She does, she hef spoken of it," Krum said. "She tinks di girl from di dance is... whot is word.. mad? Talkink of impossible thinks. She is very strange."

"Luna, yeah, she is," Harry admitted, "but she knows who she is. Anyway, we're just friends."

"Like wit Herm-own-ninny?"

A rustling of leaves and a branch breaking drew the boys' attention to the forest. Both had their wands in hand instantly. The little hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood on end.

"What lives in dere?" Krum asked.


Something came crashing through the woods, Harry gripped his wand tighter a hex on the tip of his tongue. As it got closer, Harry dropped his wand. It was a man, it was Mr. Crouch.

"Mr. Crouch," Harry said approaching the man cautiously. "Mr. Crouch, can we help you?"

Mr. Crouch grabbed the front of the boy's robes, "Dumbledore! I must speak to Dumbledore!"

Harry looked to Krum for help, the man still held him tight. Krum stepped forward his wand raised. Harry shook his head.

"Mr. Crouch, I can go get Dumbledore, but you need to let me go," Harry pleaded, "If you let me go we can go together."

"Made a terrible mistake," Crouch breathed letting go of Harry's robes.

Harry stepped back from his captor. Something funny happened, Mr. Crouch started talking to a tree as if it were Percy Weasley.

"He is one of your ministers," Krum said watching the man uncomfortably. "He is mad."

Harry shook his head, "He's confused. He's acting like that tree is Percy. What he's talking about happened a few months ago. It's like how those Muggles acted after the Ministry used Memory Charms after what happened with the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup. We need to get help," Harry said looking from the confused Crouch to the castle.

"You wish to takes him to Dumbledore? What madness does he needs to hear?" Krum asked skeptically.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, "But we can't just drag him. Can you watch him while I go?"

Krum clutched his wand, nodding.

"Thanks," Harry said before running up the lawn.
"Potter," Professor Snape snapped as Harry crashed through the front door. "What in the name of Merlin do you think you are doing?"

"I need to talk to Dumbledore," Harry breathed, rubbing slightly at his side, winded from his long run.

Snape raised an eyebrow, "Why is that?"

Harry took a big breath in, "Mr. Crouch is with Krum, down by the forest. He's acting sort of funny. Mr. Crouch, not Krum. He's talking to trees like they're Percy Weasley and going on about making mistakes."

"Show me," Snape said heading out the door. Harry jogged down the grounds, trying to stay with the professor's long strides. A frown appeared on his face, it grew deeper as the came closer to where Harry had left Krum with Crouch.

"Potter," Snape said looking around.

"There," Harry said pointing at the dark lump.

Snape pushed Harry behind him, "Stay here." Snape waved his wand a silver doe raced across the lawn, back to the castle. He waved his wand casting several spells over the unconscious Krum. Apparently approving of the results Snape stepped closer to and tapped Krum with his wand.

The heavy brows furrowed as Krum sat up with the aid of Professor Snape.

"Where is Mr. Crouch," Snape asked waving his wand over Krum once more.

"I do not know," Krum rubbed the back of his head gingerly. "He was upset when Potter left. He yelled. He must hef hit me."

"What are you doing here, Snape?" Moody demanded to find the trio.

"Potter said he had run into a distressed Mr. Crouch this evening, who requested to speak with the headmaster. I returned with him as not to put the students in harm's way. Snape's tone was neutral, but Harry knew Snape would love to hex the paranoid Auror.

"Severus, Alastor, I am glad you are both here," Dumbledore said cutting the heavy silence between the teachers. "Mr. Krum, could you explain what happened?"

"The man came up to us when Potter and I were talkink," Krum began. "He was mad, talkink of mistakes, to trees. Potter went to get help, leaving me with him. He was upset, he must hef hit me. I woke up with your professor standing over me."

"Alastor, see if you can find him. We must know what he wanted to discuss." Dumbledore looked at Harry, "Severus, take Harry to my office."

Snape nodded, "Come along, Potter."

Harry followed without complaint, he could feel the displeasure coming off the Potions instructor but
why it was directed at him, Harry was uncertain. He didn't have to wait too long to find out.

"What were you thinking, Potter?" Snape demanded as soon as the door to the headmaster's office shut.

"What did I do?" Harry asked.

"Why were you alone with Krum? The mutt and I specifically instructed you to be cautious around those from Durmstrang." Snape hissed.

Harry flopped into a chair, "We were just talking."

"And what could be so important to put your life at risk? Quidditch standings? Chocolate Frog Cards?"

"No," Harry sighed.

An eyebrow raised in response.

Harry rolled his eyes, "Hermione."

"What was that?"

"He wanted to ask me about Hermione. The papers were saying that Hermione was my girlfriend or something. He wanted to make sure it wasn't true, I guess." Harry explained.

"And you felt it worth your life to discuss a nonexistent romantic relationship with him?" Snape asked.

"I didn't think it was that big of a deal," Harry sighed.

Snape rolled his eyes, "That much is obvious."

Harry pouted, "How come you never warned Hermione about Durmstrang? Doesn't she have to worry about them too?"

"Potter, Miss. Granger is capable of taking care of herself. I am sure she could handle herself if the need arose."

"And I couldn't?" Harry demanded.

Snape sat next to Harry making sure his onyx orbs meet with Harry's. "Harry, Granger does not have the same concerns. She did not defeat the Dark Lord as a toddler. She does not have to worry that a deranged follower will try to use her as compensation for their sins."

"It's Krum. He doesn't seem so bad." Harry sighed looking away from the teacher.

"People may not always show you their true self, Harry." Snape reminded him.

"I know," Harry agreed. His eyes cast around the room over all the strange artifacts. The portraits of past headmasters dozing comfortably in their frames. His eyes fell of a silver light in the corner of the room. "What's that?" Harry asked walking toward the source.
Snape joined him by the stone bowl. "It is a Pensieve, a way to see look back on your memories."

"How," Harry asked prodding a finger at the shimmering surface.

Snape reached out grabbed his hand away, "You can break the surface of the memory. You are able to see the memories outside yourself."

Harry frowned, "I don't think I get it." He pulled his arm away from the bowl.

Snape let go of his wrist. "You need not concern himself it, Potter. It is a great offense to enter another's memories without their permission."

"Yes sir," Harry said giving the bowl one more look.

"Hello again, Harry," Dumbledore greeted the teen as he entered the office. "Severus, thank you for waiting with him." Snape nodded politely."I see Severus was showing you the mysteries of the Pensieve."

"In fact, I was not, Headmaster. Potter would have barged into yours, I had not been present." Snape corrected.

"Ahhh, Severus, one can sometimes not help their curiosity," Dumbledore said his voice light, a small smile hidden in the waist length beard.

Snape frown, "That is no excuse for such incivility."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Now Harry, can you please give me your account of the night's events?"

"It was like Krum said, we were walking back to the castle by the forest when Mr. Crouch appeared. He was all dirty and going on about mistakes he made. It didn't make a lot of sense."

Harry apologized. "Mr. Crouch kept asking for you so I left him with Krum and came looking for you. Professor Snape was mad at me for running in the halls until I explained. Then we want back, but Krum was knocked out. Wait," Harry turned to Snape, "was that doe a Patronus?"

"It was," Dumbledore confirmed. "The Patronus a fascinating bit of magic not only can they be used to dispel Dementors but to send messages as well."

"Cool," Harry said sitting back, he could almost hear Snape rolling his eyes in response to his comment.

Dumbledore placed his wand to his temple removing a long silver strand, almost like a liquid hair. Harry watched as the man dropped it into the stone basin before them. The image of a teenage sitting with a younger Dumbledore floating up. Dumbledore added another, this time a young man pleading for his father not to send him away.

"Who was that?" Harry asked.

"Bartemius Crouch Jr., he and three others were sentenced to life for their vicious attacks on an Auror and his family," Dumbledore said adding another memory.
"Mr. Crouch's son was a Death Eater?" Harry was surprised, Mr. Weasley said the man hated dark magic. Harry remembered how the man reacted seeing the Dark Mark in the sky once more. He had been desperate to blame it on anyone, even his devoted house-elf.

"He was," Snape confirmed. "The boy died not long after being sent to Azkaban. His cohorts are still there."

"Were the Auror and his family okay," Harry asked after a moment.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly, "No, they never recovered. They are still in St. Mungo's."

Harry furrowed his brow, "Mr. Crouch's son attacked Neville's parents?"

"Yes, had Neville never mentioned why he lived with his grandmother?" Dumbledore asked.

"He said they were sick, but he never said who did it," Harry clarified.

"I see," Dumbledore said with a pause. "Now, why don't you head back to the Tower?"

"Yes sir," Harry said getting up, "Good night Headmaster, Professor Snape."

"Good evening," both said.

Dumbledore must have let Sirius know about what happened because Harry received a letter from Sirius the next morning lecturing him almost on the same points Professor Snape had last night. He shook his head as he shoved the letter into his pocket. The two men might not get along, but they were so much alike when it came to worrying about Harry.

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Professor Snape put their Occlumency lessons on hold the week before exams were to start. He didn't have the time to practice with Harry, but he still expected Harry to continue with their nightly exercises. Harry was glad for the break, it gave him more time to prepare for the upcoming task.

Hermione and Neville were helping him look up and practice useful spells. They found one that would act like a compass to locate true north. The cup would be at the center of the maze, this way he would have an idea of which way to go. There was one Neville found to slow the momentum of an approaching enemy. Professor McGonagall gave them an extra classroom to practice in after stumbling on the group several times.

The morning of the third task arrived, everyone was excited for the exams to finish and the Triwizard winner to be announced that evening. Harry sat with his friends at breakfast listening as Hermione quizzed Neville on various topics for their History of Magic exam which was just after breakfast. Harry wasn't sure he was going to go. Professor McGonagall had thrown him out of the room the day before for distracting the others as they took their exams by summoning and repelling objects across the room.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said briskly as Harry made to follow Neville and Hermione upstairs. He decided he would try and read during the exam, that was if his nerves didn't get the best
Harry stopped on the rise of the first stair, "Ma'am."

"The families of the champions have been invited to come and watch the task. As you do not have to sit your examination, you may spend the day with your family." Professor McGonagall explained.

Harry grinned and followed the woman into the same chamber the four students had waited in before the first task. Krum and another heavy-browed man stood in the corner speaking in Bulgarian. Fleur had her arm wrapped around her little sister's shoulders as they spoke in lightning fast French with their parents. Cedric was by the fireplace, trying not to appear embarrassed as his father told him about how he had bragged about his son being the true Hogwarts Champion and leading in the standings. Harry felt a bit bad for Cedric. As much as he wanted people to notice his achievements, it was obvious he didn't enjoy his father's unrelenting boasting.

"Hey kiddo," Sirius said pulling Harry into a tight embrace as he reached the chair where his fate in this tournament had been decided only a few months before.

"Hey," Harry returned finally letting go of the man. "Hi Remus," he added to the werewolf sitting in the chair beside them.

"Good morning Harry," Remus said closing his book. "The Weasley will be joining us later today, after lunch. I believe Molly wanted us to have some time to catch up."

"Great," Harry said as he embraced the man.

"How about me and Moony show you about the castle, like where we used to go?" Sirius suggested. "I bet you won't have seen half the places."

"He has the map, Sirius," Remus reminded his old friend, though he said it very quietly as if he was scared a professor would punish him for speaking out of turn in class.

Sirius let out a bark of laughter, "That's different than seeing and doing, Rem."

The two men filled Harry's morning with stories of adventures from their school days. Most featured his father in a central role. Occasionally, there were mentions of his mother playing a role in their antics. Who they didn't ever mention was Peter Pettigrew. Harry was glad they said nothing that may dull his contempt of the treacherous rat.

Mrs. Weasley apologized at lunch that Mr. Weasley wouldn't be able to make it, an emergency call from the Ministry. The body of a second missing Ministry official was found murdered that morning. Harry accepted and admitted to being surprised by the news. She told him they were trying to keep it out of the papers after all that was going on with Mr. Crouch's disappearance, sudden reappearance, and subsequent disappearance.

After lunch, Mrs. Weasley led the group on her own tour. It turned out, Mrs. Weasley had her own mischievous history to the castle. It was clear to Harry where the twins got it from. Harry wondered if Mrs. Weasleys' own children knew even half the stories she told him that afternoon.

Not matter how much Mrs. Weasley and Remus nagged him at dinner, Harry couldn't eat a bite, not even treacle tart, his favorite. He pushed his potatoes around the plate as Mrs. Weasley interrogated her children about how their exams went. He was somewhat relieved when Mr. Bagman came over
to collect him. The walk down to the pitch was tense. None of the champions would make eye contact with him.

Harry held tight to his wand, as Mr. Bagman went of the instructions for the night. Harry nodded in the appropriate places, not really taking it in. It would all be over once he made it to the center of the maze. That's all he had to do. Win or lose, as long as he finished this he would have survived the tournament. That's all he could ask for right now.

Remus, Sirius, and the Weasleys came by to wish Harry good luck, with tight hugs from all. Remus slipped a small piece of paper into his palm as their hug broke. Harry frowned, Remus, shook his head, and mouthed "in the maze". The teen cocked his head to the side, he couldn't believe the man would help him cheat, but why else would the man hand him a note that he wasn't supposed to read the until he was inside the maze?

Harry placed the note in his pocket waiting for Mr. Bagman to blow the whistle. Cedric was doing jumping jacks trying to expel his nervous energy. Mr. Bagman motioned for Harry and Cedric to approach the entry. The whistle blew the boys headed into the maze together, walking until they reached the first fork.

"Good luck," Cedric muttered as he set off down the right fork.

"You too," Harry said heading down the left.

The quiet was eerie, the darkness oppressive, as he wandered. He had to turn back twice as he ran into dead ends. At the first one, Harry took a moment to retrieve the note from his pocket, curious what it could be. By the faint light of his wand, Harry could make out a familiar spidery scrawl.

Potter,
As I was unable to wish you luck before the task, may I convey my best wishes now. May you make it through this maze with the least amount of bodily harm. If the need should arise do not be too stubborn to request assistance from the professors. Your life is worth a bag of galleons, Harry, no matter how large.
Be aware, SS

He took the next left trying to find his way to the center. He thought he heard a scream, but then there were red sparks, someone had signaled they were in distress. One less person to compete against. He was mildly curious as to who it might have been.

When he turned the next corner, everything turned upside down. Harry stared at the stars that were now the ground, unsure what to do. Harry held his breath, closed his eyes, put his foot out, and stepped forward. He cracked an eye open, glad to see the grass under him once more. He rushed down the path taking the next right as it would head back north.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up as a familiar cold crept over him. The Dementor glided toward him, its rotten hand sticking out under it robe, outstretched to grab Harry.

He summoned the happiest thought he could come up with, getting out of this maze and yelled, "Expecto Patronum!" The Dementor stumbled, tripping over its robes as the silver doe charged it down.
"You're not a Dementor, you're a Boggart," Harry realized. "Riddikulus!"

The Dementor-Boggart disappeared in a puff of smoke. Harry heard another scream, this one much closer. Harry bit his lip, not sure what to do, then there was another scream. Harry pointed his wand at the hedge and burned a hole just large enough for him to climb through. Krum had Cedric under the Cruciatius Curse. Without a second thought, Harry stunned Krum.

"I thought he wasn't too bad," Cedric breathed as Harry tried to help the other boy sit up.

"He's not," Harry said, "he's always been good to me and my friend Hermione. He's told her how he doesn't like how focused on the Dark Arts they are at Durmstrang."

"He must have been lying to her," Cedric said standing up shakily.

"I guess," Harry sighed.

"Do you want me to signal the professors?" Asked Cedric.

Harry nodded.

"Good luck," Cedric said leaving Harry once more.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, it was only the two of them left, he had an equal chance to win. Harry took off once more. His encounter with the Sphinx wasn't as bad as he thought it might be.

There he was, the cup was only a short run away, he could make it. Then Cedric was there, but he was closer... He was going to win. The Hufflepuff looked back, seeing Harry he stopped....

A crash came through the silence. An eight-foot tall spider came over the hedge between Harry and Cedric. It opened and closed its pincers coming toward Harry, lunging and picked Harry up under his knee. Harry screamed in pain as the spider's venom sank into his flesh.

Harry tried to cast something to make the creature let him go. Nothing worked it was too big or too magical. Cedric stepped forward, "Stunning Spell on three. Aim for the underbelly. One....two....three!"

The two flashes of red light hit the spider hit it at the same time. It released its jaw sending Harry crashing to the ground again. Harry tried to stand, his injured leg collapsing under him immediately.

"Take it," Harry told the Hufflepuff, "it's yours. There is no way I'm getting there on this leg."

"It should be yours," Cedric said walking not toward the cup, but Harry. "I never would have made it past the first task without your help."

"You helped me with the lake," Harry said hissing through the pain.

"I got help with that too," Cedric admitted.

"Hagrid helped me with the dragons," Harry confessed. "Just take it so we can get out of here."

"No," Cedric refused.
"Go on, be the biggest win for Hufflepuff in a century," Harry urged.

"Together, we do it together," Cedric said grabbing Harry and getting him to his feet. The two hobbled together. They grabbed the glowing blue cup, the jerking sensation behind his bellybutton told Harry they were on their way. It was over, he survived the Triwizard Tournament.

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"Where are we?" Cedric asked, looking around the dark surroundings. "This isn't another part of the task, is it? Should we send up red sparks?"

Harry couldn't see very much, they stood on the edge of some woods. It was nowhere near Hogwarts, that he knew. "I don't think that will work. Do you know how to send messages with a Patronus?"

The other boy shook his head, "Do you?"

Harry too shook his head. He would have to ask Professor Snape how to teach how to do that during their next lesson.

"Maybe we should see where we are?" Diggory suggested.

Harry nodded. "Wands out," he said tightening the hold on his holly and phoenix feather wand.

Cedric slipped an arm under Harry's arm, helping him to walk. Stepping out of the woods they were in a graveyard now, a family one Harry would guess by the few names he could read. When he looked up, it felt like a cold bucket of water was dumped over his head.

"I know this place," Harry said. The large house looming over them was the one from those strange dreams that made his scar ache.

Cedric turned to Harry, "From what?"

"Kill the spare," a reedy voice said as a man approached the pair.

A flash of green light and Cedric fell to the ground, dead. Harry saw the boy's unblinking blue eyes looking, but not seeing the sky above. Ropes wrapped themselves tightly around Harry's injured frame. Harry was drug away from the body and the cup.

Harry didn't have his wand, it fell out of his hand as the man dragged him across the yard. They stopped in front of the largest headstone. The arms of the angel came down the grab him. It was then that Harry recognized the man who had killed Cedric, who dragged him across the yard, Harry wouldn't forget those pale, watery eyes for the rest of his life, it was Pettigrew.

Harry forced the violent thoughts under his shields. He couldn't afford to lose his temper now. He was an injured fourteen-year-old wizard. If Pettigrew was here, Voldemort must be near.

Harry needed to figure a way to escape. He was hurt and unarmed Voldemort would kill him this time for certain.
Harry flinched as the rat-faced wizard took his blood with a silver dagger, combining it to the concoction. He watched in horrified fascination as Pettigrew added the remaining ingredients to the bubbling vat as he recited a complex incantation. What emerged from the cauldron was not the half-alive, mutilated baby-wizard, but a full-grown restored Voldemort. The red, vertically slit pupils, pale flesh, and lack of a nose revealed that the wizard was no longer truly human.

Death Eaters appeared within instants of Voldemort touching Pettigrew's Dark Mark. The restored Voldemort explained how he was able to return to this form. That Harry was no longer a threat to him as he had used the boy's blood to bring himself back. The protection Lily once gave him now ran through his body as well. To prove the point the maniacal wizard touched Harry's face. The boy felt like his head was going to split open, the dark wizard remained unaffected.

Voldemort's mistake was his pride. He wanted to show his Death Eaters just how powerful he was by defeating Harry in a one on one duel. Something unexpected happened, however, the wands would not duel properly.

Instead of Voldemort's Killing Curse striking Harry it collided with the boy's Disarmament Spell. When the green light hit red, a golden web of light formed a bubble around the two wizards. They were still connected, a bead of the gold moving between them. Harry tried with all his might to force it back to Voldemort. He didn't know exactly what was going to happen, but he knew his only chance to live lay with that ball of light staying with Voldemort.

Harry was right. The ball of light forced its way down the older wizard's wand and from it emerged not quite a ghost, but more like heavy shadows. The Hufflepuff was followed by a middle-aged woman version of the girl from the Pensieve. After she came an old man, the one from Harry's first dream, then Harry's mother. Harry fought back tears as she told him to hold on until James arrived. Then he was James, the odd sort of shadows paced the space of the web, terrifying and confusing Voldemort. The shadows gave Harry the time he needed to reach Cedric's limp form and summon the Triwizard Cup once more. He was never so happy to have a Portkey transport him.

The sound when they returned to Hogwarts was deafening first in victory but quickly followed by horror as the professors instantly realized something was wrong. Harry was too exhausted to question it as Moody forced him back to the castle. He followed the man to his office, he was asking about the Dark Lord's return with great enthusiasm.

Harry couldn't understand how the man could know about that yet. Harry hadn't said anything yet. Moody approached Harry with a knife, but he was shot back. Dobby forced the man away from Harry who fought to stay awake. A moment later, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape were bursting through the door, all with wands drawn.

Dumbledore ordered the house elf to take Harry to his office. The house elf was asked to go and retrieve Winky from the kitchens. Professor McGonagall took Harry up to Professor Dumbledore's office to wait for the headmaster while he interrogated the Moody imposter. Harry would not be alone, Sirius and Remus were sent there as soon as Harry reappeared on the edge of the maze.

It was only later that Harry learned the truth how the imposter, was able to perpetrate his scheme. Under Dumbledore's watchful eye, Professor Snape administered a powerful truth potion to Harry's captor. The man all believed to be Alastor Moody was not, he instead was a man all believed to be dead, Barty Crouch Jr. He had kidnapped and captured the real Moody at the beginning of September, before he reached the castle, replacing him as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He had spent the year living under the disguise of Polyjuice Potion. He had been stealing
the needed ingredients from Snape's all year. He was the one to add Harry's name to the Goblet of Fire.

Crouch had been kept his father as a prisoner under the Imperious for most of the year, as payment for the years he had been forced to do the same. But his father had escaped and come to confess what he had done, to warn Dumbledore of his son's and Voldemort's plan. Crouch had killed his father the day Harry and Krum found him in the forest. He hid the Transfigured body in the forest as Harry went for help.

The evening of the Third Task he had turned the cup into a Portkey to transport Harry to where the Dark Lord was to be reborn. He removed many of the obstacles in Harry's way to the center of the maze. He Stunned Fleur when she was too close to the center, and he put Krum under the Imperius Curse to attack Cedric. Crouch was to join his master as soon as possible. The burn of his Dark Mark was the proof he required to know he had been successful.

As Dumbledore interrogated the fake-Moody, Harry sat dazed in the headmaster's office. Remus fretfully began to treat Harry's wound, cleaning the blood away from Pettigrew's cut on his arm. Fawkes' tears healed much of the damage to Harry's leg. Sirius anxiously pace the small chamber occasionnally swearing at one of the portrait's of a deceased headmaster. The portrait apparent was one of Sirius' less pleasant ancestors.

When the headmaster finally did appear, he requested Harry tell him all that happened once they left the maze, over the very vocal objections of the boy's guardians.

Harry did his best to recall everything. He told them of the potion, Pettigrew taking Harry's blood, and now how Voldemort could touch him. Harry struggled with what happened with the wands. Dumbledore was able to explain it better.

A wand will never act properly when forced to fight its twin. Harry's and Voldemort's wands had turned to making the other reveal the spells it had cast, Prior Incantatem. The weighted shadows were not ghosts, but more like an echo of the persons, Voldemort had killed with that wand. Finally, the man let Harry be taken to the Hospital Wing.

More people were waiting for them there. Mrs. Weasley was tucked into her husband's chest as they waited. Hermione and Neville sat beside one another on one of the empty cots. Fleur and Viktor were at the far end of the ward kept company by their families. Professor Snape was the last to enter the room in a swish of black robes.

"Severus," Dumbledore turned to the Potions Master, "I must ask you to return to your role. The time has finally come."

Professor Snape nodded, "Yes Headmaster."

"Don't go," Harry cried, looking up from his cot at the dark haired man. "He'll kill you. He thinks you've betrayed him and he'll kill you." His sobs made it hard to understand what he was saying.

Professor Snape sat on the edge of Harry's bed facing the panicked youth. He carefully took the
boy's face in his hands. "I must go, Potter. There is no one who can serve in this role. I accepted my fate many years ago."

"But you'll die," Harry choked out. He tried to shake his head, but his teacher still held it in a firm but gentle hold.

"Harry," Snape whispered, "you must believe me, I know what I will face tonight. The Dark Lord will not be pleased with me, but I assure you, he will not kill me. I will be back shortly. Every moment of delay only increases the Dark Lord's fury."

"Then why don't..." Harry began, but couldn't complete the sentence.

Professor Snape used a calloused thumb to wipe away a stray tear, "I need you to understand, Harry. I knew this day would come since you struck down the Dark Lord the first time. I am prepared. This is what I have been readying you for the last year. If I am to succeed, I must count on you."

Harry wasn't able to shake his head as it was still in Snape's large hands. "Me?" He managed to ask.

"You," Snape confirmed. "You must Occlude everything of our relationship. If the Dark Lord has the slightest inclination that you care for me, or the inverse, both our lives will be at serious risk. Do you understand?" Snape's dark eyes were locked with Harry's, unblinking. The seconds of silence were heavy feeling, like minutes.

Harry whispered, "You care for me?"

Snape rolled his eyes, his hands moving back to the bed coverings. "Do you think I would put my life in danger if I did not, Potter? You are more than The-Boy-Who-Lived to me. You should realize that by now."

Harry gave him a half shrug in response. His eyes were fixed on the man's long fingers, only centimeters from his own. He took in a small scar on the side of Snape's left index finger.

"None of that, Potter. There is no time," Snape said, "Do you believe me, Harry."

Harry nodded, his gaze still on the Potions Master's hardworking hands.

"Harry," Snape asked his tone not quite pleading.

"I know," Harry managed.

"I must go now," Snape said standing. "Madame Pomfrey is to give you a measure of Dreamless Sleep. It will enable you to sleep through the night. I will return as soon as possible. Harry, you must Occlude from this moment on. You must have your shields up for the remainder of the war. Many lives are at risk."

Harry made another silent nod.

Snape rose from the bed in a flurry of black material. Harry wasn't sure how Professor Snape was going to join the Death Eaters. Harry pushed the thoughts away, burying them under his shields. He couldn't think about that now. He needed to keep Professor Snape safe. If the Voldemort entered his mind now, Professor Snape or others could die. Harry could be responsible for that. No, he would Occlude all of that like the professor told him.
Madame Pomfrey came back a moment later followed by Mrs. Weasley.

"You need to take this, Mr. Potter, it will help you sleep."

Madame Pomfrey instructed. In her hand, she held a glass with a thick purple liquid in it.

Harry shook his head, "Not yet."

The nurse frowned, "Mr. Potter, do not argue with me."

Harry shook his head, "Not yet."

Mrs. Weasley sat in the spot just vacated by the Potions Master, "Why not, Harry dear?"

"I have...I have to...I need to clear my mind...Get my shields up..." Harry stammered.

"Do what you need then, love," Mrs. Weasley said patting his blanket covered knee.

Harry said in silence trying to calm his mind. "I can't," he cried throwing his back onto the pillows behind him. The tears following from his emerald eyes once more.

"Oh dearie," Mrs. Weasley scooped Harry into a tight embrace, holding Harry tight as he sobbed uncomfortably into her shoulder. It was the closest thing he had ever had to a mother's hug since Lily Potter died thirteen years before. Harry didn't know how long he cried, or how long she held him in her warm embrace. His sobs decreased, into gentle snuffling. His thoughts becoming less frantic.

"How about you try those shields now?" Mrs. Weasley inquired.

It was too hard to think, so much had happened tonight. He shoved everything related to the night under his shields. He didn't want to think about Professor Snape in danger. He didn't want to think about Voldemort returned to power. He didn't want to think about Cedric. With this, the tears began to creep up on him once more. Mrs. Weasley put the cup to his lips making him drink. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Harry woke hours later, the sunlight streaming into the ward. On one side of his bed, Remus sat reading a potions journal. The other Sirius half-lay, half-sat in an armchair, his robes thrown over him like a blanket.

"Harry," Remus greeted setting aside his reading.

"Hi," Harry mumbled, fumbling for his glasses.

Remus picked them up from the nightstand and placed them in Harry's outstretched palm. "How are you feeling?"

Harry ignored the question, struggling to sit up he asked, "Where's Professor Snape? Is he back?"

Remus pushed him back onto his pillows, "Severus is fine. He's back in his quarters. I will let him know you were asking about him, but you need your rest, Harry."
"I'm fine," Harry said trying to sit up once more.

"Sirius, aren't you going to help?"

Sirius let out a wide yawn, "Looks like you got it handled, Moony."

Remus pushed Harry back to the mattress. "Stay there."

Harry stopped struggling and lay back. "Can I see Neville and Hermione?"

"Harry, they're a few things we need to discuss before you see anyone," Remus said gently.

Harry frowned, Remus's expression was making him uncomfortable.

"What's wrong," Harry asked.

"Harry," Remus almost sighed. "The Ministry..."

"The Ministry doesn't believe you, kid," Sirius said finally sitting up properly. He stood and put his rumpled robes back on properly over his shirt and trousers.

"What? What don't they believe?" Harry asked, shaking his head softly from side to side.

"The tossers don't believe any of it," Sirius told him firmly.

"Padfoot," Remus chastised softly.

"He deserves the truth, Remus," Sirius said to his friend. "Fudge is a terrified idiot. He doesn't want to believe Voldemort is back. He's saying the Diggory boy died in a tragic accident. He's telling the papers that it was the trauma of witnessing that that made you say all those things last night."

"But it wasn't just me," Harry protested.

"Yeah well, Snape isn't the world's most loved Death Eater," Sirius grumbled.

"Dumbledore though," Harry continued.

"Even more reason not to back you up," Sirius said, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "Fudge has never had a firm hold on his job since my escape. Even before he was never very confident. He was always asking Dumbledore for what he should do. It was like a little kid borrowing their dad's robes, they don't fit. If he admits Voldemort is back, he's afraid people will want someone else to lead them. I wouldn't be surprised if a Ministry group hasn't come by to see him already."

"Barty Crouch Jr," Harry tried.

"The Dementor Fudge brought with him Kiss him before Crouch could admit the lot," Sirius explained.

"They killed Cedric," Harry moaned.

"They did," Sirius confirmed. "He's the first to die in a war that will take many more."
"That's enough, Sirius," Remus said cutting off his friend. "Let's get you something to eat, Harry."

"I'm not hungry," Harry said staring at the blankets trying to understand all that Sirius said.

"Harry, you need to eat," Remus said.

"I'm not hungry," Harry repeated.

Remus ordered a plate anyway, keeping under a Heating Charm.

Harry lay on his bed processing what Sirius told him that morning still, working on what Professor Snape said the night before. Sirius and Remus let him be, keeping a careful eye on him. Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic arrived a short while before dinner.

"Here are your winnings, Harry. We would normally make a formal presentation but given the circumstances..." Minister Fudge said twisting his lime-green bowler hat agitated.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want it."

"Harry, they're your winnings. You earned them," Fudge replied.

Harry shook his head again, "Cedric got there first. He should have won. Give it to his family."

"I will leave that to you," Fudge said stepping back.

"Minister," Harry said looking away from the bag of gold sitting on his nightstand.

"Yes my boy," Fudge said placing his hat back on.

"I wasn't lying," Harry said firmly.

"Ahhh...yes..." Fudge stumbled, "Yes, I believe that you believe that." He walked away from them without another word.

"Alright there Harry," Sirius asked.

Harry shook his head. "Can I talk to Cedric's mum and dad?"

"Are you sure you want to?" Remus asked.

Harry nodded, "They should know what really happened."

"I'll see what we can do," Remus agreed. He put a plate in front of Harry. "Try and eat something. I know you're not hungry, but you need to eat."

Harry didn't protest this time but ate less than half of what he was given. Neither of the adults said a word about it. Harry and Remus played chess until Neville and Hermione arrived after dinner. They brought armloads of cards and get well gifts from their fellow students. Harry wanted to be sick just looking at them.

His friends didn't want to know what happened in the maze or after. They didn't ask how Cedric died, or how he got back. Harry wouldn't ever be able to find enough words to express his thanks for
that. Instead, they talked about the summer, what they might like to do, places to go. Before the Third Task, Harry knew he was going to spend most of the summer making Sirius' old house livable, now what seemed like mind-numbing chores were a looked forward to distraction.

The Diggorys arrived the next morning, escorted by Mr. Weasley. Mr. Diggory was a mess, torn to pieces by the loss of his only child. Mrs. Diggory was quiet but no less heartbroken. Her pain, past the point of tears. Harry told them all, trying to explain how Cedric had died. Mrs. Diggory thanked him for bringing back her son's body.

"You should have this," Harry said shoving the bag at her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first."

Mrs. Diggory looked at Harry, a sad smile, "No dear. That's yours. Cedric would have wanted you to have it."

Dejected Harry's hand fell back to the bed. He sighed unsure of what to do with the coins now. He didn't need the money and wanted nothing to do with it. Maybe he could give it away. The Weasley could use the money, but Harry knew they would never take it. The same was true for Remus.

Sirius and Remus went home the next morning. They let Harry decide if he wanted to take the train or Floo to Sirius' new home. Harry wasn't sure what he wanted to do, it wouldn't feel right not taking the train with the others. But then again, he wasn't sure he wanted people to look at him, asking questions. He was very glad to be locked away in the Hospital Wing in some ways.

Madame Pomfrey cast yet another diagnosis spell over Harry. Like the last ten, it showed nothing was significantly wrong with Harry. His blood pressure was a bit high, but it was put down to stress. With another wave of her wand a silver hummingbird appeared and darted out of the room. A silver doe returned a moment later. Madame Pomfrey pulled the curtains further shut. Harry stopped eating, not really interested in his dinner anyway. He listened for further sounds as he pushed around the remaining bits of his stew with little interest. There was a rush of the Floo flaring to life and mutterings too soft for Harry to make out what was being said.

"You keep that up and Lupin will start watching your every bite," Professor Snape said taking a seat that Sirius occupied for the last several days. His approach so quiet and Harry so lost in his thoughts he had realized the man had come to join him. Harry shrugged.

"Do desist with that apathetic gesture," Snape demanded. "What is the matter, Potter?"

"Where were you?" Harry asked pushing the tray away. "Remus said you were coming by and you never did. It's been days."

"Potter, did you not understand a single word of what I said before I left?"

Harry cocked his head to the side.

"Harry, even you must realize how dangerous it is for me to visit you now. It is well known that Black and I despise one another. I had no desire to row with the mutt in front of you. More so the point, what questions might arise if the wrong people were to find out I had visited you in your sick bed? Why would I visit a student not in my own house, a child I am supposed to despise? Could you have managed to maintain your wards properly under that stress?"

Harry sigh, "I know. I was just worried."
"I understand, Potter." Snape said softly. "However, the need for decession is even greater now the Dark Lord had returned. The Ministry's refusal to see the truth puts all lives at risk. We must be vigilant in all of our actions and inactions."

Harry was released from the Hospital Wing the evening before the train was to leave for London. The normal end of term feast was canceled, a memorial service was being held for Cedric before they all boarded the train back to London.

Harry didn't know what to expect at this memorial service. If there was anything done for his parents, he was too young to remember, not that the Dursleys would have attended any sort of wizarding memorial service. Dobby had packed Harry's bags the night before, under the request of Professor Snape, so he was free to wander the corridors after breakfast. Harry found Luna carrying an armload of books.

"People still hiding your things?" Harry asked taking a few off the top of the precarious pile.

"Hullo Harry," Luna said dreamily. "They are, but I think I've found everything. Don't you need to be packing?"

Harry shook his head, "Somebody bribed one of the house elves to do it for me last night. I just got out of the Hospital Wing."

Luna stopped walking, Harry paused to stand beside her. He needed her to lead the way, he had no idea where the door to the Ravenclaw Common Room was. She stood in silence taking Harry in, her blue eyes seeing more than his outside. Harry wasn't as unnerved as he was when Professor Snape or Headmaster Dumbledore did the same action.

"You shouldn't push everything down, Harry," Luna said softly.

"I'm not pushing anything down."

"You are only hiding from yourself when you deny what happened," Luna countered.

Like so often, Harry didn't know what to say to that. Luna led him to a door on the six floor in the south tower. Luna picked up the knocker that was made of the tail of an eagle.

"I shouldn't hear your password, Luna," Harry warned.

A reedy voice asked, "What gets broken without being held?"

"Wait, you don't have a password?" Harry asked as Luna pondered the inquiry.

"No, of course not," Luna said more distracted than usual.

"But what if you can't figure it out?" Harry asked.

"Then you wait until somebody can, how else are you to learn?" Luna said, before turning back to the door. "A promise."

"Acceptable," the eagle said before the door swung open.
"I think I like my passwords better," Harry mumbled mostly to himself.

Luna motioned for him to return her books. Harry placed them back on top of the large stack reaching just under her nose.

"Luna, you should come sit with me and my friends...at the... for the memorial service...or on the train." Harry offered.

The door closed before he was able to hear her response. It felt wrong just waiting outside the Common Room, so Harry walked back downstairs. Slowly more and more students began to drift into the Great Hall. Unlike any other event, people were not sitting with their houses or their school.

"Harry, would you mind if I sat with Viktor?" Hermione asked, looking from Harry and over her shoulder to the boy sitting with a number of his fellow students from Durmstrang. Krum had become the surrogate head of the school after Karkaroff disappeared as the Dark Mark burned.

"Go ahead," Harry said giving his friend a weak smile.

Neville sat hand in hand with Ginny. Luna did not join them, Harry didn't actually see her at the service at all. Dumbledore spoke about Cedric being slain. The headmaster did not mince words, he said Cedric was murdered by Voldemort. Harry noticed a few children of Death Eaters were not saddened by the mention of the murder of their schoolmate, they seem to revel in the mention of an upcoming war.

Harry saw Cho Chang sitting in the front tears running down her face. She was dating Cedric according to Lavender Brown. Harry tried to focus on Dumbledore's words about coming together as one and facing the evil ahead, but his attention kept drifting. He watched the professors' guarded expressions, the reaction of the students from Beauxbaton and Durmstrang at the call for unity.

The crowd dismissed there was a bustle as students shuffled to say goodbye to their new foreign friends. Krum came over with Hermione almost wrapped around the boy's Quidditch toned arm.

"I'm sorry about Diggory," Krum said extending a hand to Harry. "He never treated me differently because I was from Durmstrang."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Are you going to have any trouble with your ship with Karkaroff gone?"

"No, he stayed in cabin," Krum informed them. "I must goes."

"Yeah," Harry said shaking the boy's hand again.

The Quidditch star leaned down and placed a kiss on Hermione's lips. Harry didn't miss the wolf whistles from Fred and George. Hermione turned as red as her tormentors' hair.

"We're only joking, Hermione," Fred reassured.

"Mind, if he hurts you, you know who you'll have to answer to," George said to Krum.

The boy raised a heavy black brow.

"Our Hermione doesn't have any brothers by blood, but she's as good as one of us," Fred said.
"So you'll be having to answer to all six of us if you hurt her," George finished for his brother.

"I would never," Krum promised.

"Good," the twins said together.

Fleur came to say goodbye as well. She made sure to kiss Neville on the cheek as well. Harry hoped he would see both of them again.

The train ride was mostly a daze when Harry tried to think back to it. Hermione showed them a glass jar with a small bug inside, it turned out Rita Skeeter was unregistered Animagus. That was how she got her stories all year. Hermione had caught her in the Hospital Wing just after Harry fell asleep. She promised to keep Skeeter's secret as long as the report did not reveal anything she heard the night of the Third Task and published no stories for the next year.

The the other thing he remembered was giving his Triwizard winnings to a worthy cause. Fred and George had lost all their savings to Bagman at the Quidditch Cup and no funds with which to launch their joke shop, a year before they were to leave school. Harry threatened to hex them if they refused to take the thousand galleon prize. They could start it with that.

Remus and Sirius were chatting with the Weasleys as they waited for Harry and the others to arrive. Harry gladly accepted the hugs from Mrs. Weasley and then her husband. Sirius didn't seem to want to let go of Harry after his own hug, he kept a hand firmly on Harry's shoulder as they said their goodbyes. Harry didn't know exactly where they were going when they left the station, but that seemed fitting as they were all facing the unknown with Voldemort's return.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I apologize for the slight delay in posting.

Thanks, everyone who took the time to fill out my survey. It was basically a tie so I am going to keep posting as one long chapter. This may change in the future, or perhaps I'll break the chapters up after the story is finished.
Summer 1995

Harry woke, screaming for the fourth time in as many days. He pushed his sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes and made his way downstairs. There was no way he was going to get back to sleep. He didn't want even if he could. One visit to the graveyard was bad enough.

"'Lo Remus," Harry greeted as he sank onto one of the benches at the long wooden table. The wizard folded down the right corner of his paper to observe the teen. His worn features turned down in disapproval at the heavy bags under Harry's dimmed emerald eyes. The boy had lost weight too.

It was a good thing Molly was arriving later that day, she would be able to make Harry eat. Remus wasn't the best cook and Sirius could burn water. How his friend could make NEWT level Potions without batting an eye, yet couldn't make a simple pasta dish was beyond Remus' understanding. Kreacher, the Black family's house-elf, did all the cooking when Sirius was growing up. Now, they were lucky if the horrid thing would serve them moldy bread.

"Good morning, Harry," Remus replied. He folded up his paper and set it aside. "How did you sleep?"

Harry shrugged, noncommittally as he poured himself a cup of coffee from the carafe on the table. "It's early yet, are you sure you don't want to go back to sleep for a few more hours?" Remus suggested. "I don't want to face Molly Weasley thinking we can't look after you properly."

"I'm fine, Remus," Harry grumbled. "You're not. That's to be expected after what happened to you in that graveyard, Harry." Remus tried to reassure Harry.

"I don't want to talk about this," Harry said slamming his mug down to the table. A little of the hot liquid sloshing out and scalding his hand.

"Harry," Remus soothed.

"No," Harry snapped, "I'm fine." He shoved away from the table, the bench falling backward with the force. He stormed out of the room coffee still in hand. He was careful out in the hallway avoiding the troll-leg umbrella stand or waking the portrait of Sirius' mother's portrait. He didn't know where he wanted to go. Remus would come looking for him in his room, the same with the library. He pushed open the door to one of the unoccupied bedrooms on the third floor. The twins could probably do well in this room. There was more storage than the other rooms, it was also away from the rest of the guests so any unusual sounds or smells were more likely to go unnoticed.

Harry glared down at the cup in his hand. He didn't know why he had it, he didn't want it. He flung it across the room coffee flying in all directions soaking into one of the unused twin beds. The porcelain mugs shattered into pieces with a satisfactory crash. The only damage to the wall, a small coffee stain at the chair railing.
His rage subsidies, he fell into the nearest of the worn mattresses. The room was a mess, the coffee wasn't the only problem. It was clear Kreacher hadn't been in this room for a good deal of time. Well, now was a good a time as any.

"Kreacher," Harry called. "Kreacher," he tried again. He sighed when the creature didn't come. He wasn't surprised by this, Harry may be Sirius' ward, but he was not a Black. They were fairly certain the elf would only listen to a Black that was listed on the family tapestry.

Harry groaned and walked down the stairs looking out for the lurking house elf. He found him peering around the door frame of the drawing room.

"Kreacher, you need to clean that bedroom on the third floor," Harry ordered.

"The Potter brat is speaking to Kreacher," Kreacher mumbled to himself.

"Hey," Harry objected, "don't talk about me like that."

"What's the matter," Sirius asked, stumbling out of his room, his long hair still messy from sleep.

"Potter brat is ordering Kreacher and Kreacher is doing it," Kreacher muttered to himself to Sirius' question.

"Cut that out Kreacher," Sirius snapped. "Harry is my ward, you're to treat Harry as if he were my son, by blood."

"Master Sirius, embarrassment to the noble name of Black is ordering Kreacher to treat Potter blood-traitor like a Black. Oh, what would mistress have to say!" The house mumbled to himself once more.

"Why I ought to," Sirius said raising a fist.

"What's going on?" Remus said coming to join the pair of wizards.

"I was just asking Kreacher to clean the bedroom on the third floor. I thought it would be good for Fred and George. They could work on their products without disturbing anyone else up there."

Harry explained.

"I see," said Remus. "Kreacher, could you please prepare the bedroom upstairs for our guests that will be arriving this afternoon?"

"The werewolf is making demands of Kreacher now. Oh, what would my old mistress have to say?" Kreacher mumbled.

"Just do it," Sirius demanded, kicking at the house elf.

The creature disappeared with a loud crack.

"You really should try and be nicer to him, Sirius," Remus chided.

"You heard how he was talking about me and Harry, Moony," Sirius remarked.
"Yes, I did," Remus confirmed. "It's not his fault that he thinks that way. He served your family all his life. Do I need to remind you what your mother said to me the first time we meet? And that was only for being half-blood. Imagine what she could have come up with if she knew about my condition?"

Sirius sighed, "I know. I just hate being back here."

"Why do we have to? " Harry asked. He wasn't very fond of the creepy house. The heads of the house elves that served the family before Kreacher lining the stairwell, the screaming portrait of Sirius' mother.

"My great grandfather was obsessed with security, this is probably one of the most secure places in Britain that aren't Hogwarts or Gringotts. It is unplottable, anti-Muggle, and any other wards you can think of," Sirius explained. "Dumbledore casting the Fidelius will make it all but as safe as either of those."

"Okay," Harry agreed reluctantly.

"Let's go have breakfast and then we can get to work on the bedrooms. Our guests should have decent accommodations for their stay," Remus suggested.

The others followed not very ecstatic. Harry helped fry the bacon and make another pot of coffee. Remus manned the eggs and tomatoes. There was little conversation as the three ate, or ever as they prepared the bedrooms for the Weasleys' arrival. Sirius had volunteered the house to be the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. What exactly the Order was, neither of the men had exactly explained to Harry.

There was a lot to do to get rooms that hadn't been used for a decade or ready for use. It was made slower by doing things the Muggle way. Sirius warned it was highly possible that objects or even whole rooms could be booby trapped. Harry found a biting book in the nightstand in room they were setting aside for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They were only able to get it finished before lunch.

The arrival of the Weasleys was announced by the insane screams of Mrs. Black as they rang the doorbell.

"We're going to have to make sure not to do that in the future," Remus remarked to Harry as they pulled close the curtains. Harry nodded as the curtains closed silencing her bigoted rantings.

"Hey Harry mate," Fred greeted as he moved past the troll leg umbrella stand.

"FILTH! VERMIN! POPULATING HOUSE OF MY FATHERS!" Walburga Black's portrait screamed.

Harry groaned and dove for the curtains again. Fred and George went for the other side, they were able to get it shut with not too much difficulty. Harry jerked his head back to the side, back down the stairs towards the kitchen. The twins followed him.

The rest of the Weasley family was already sitting around the kitchen table. Mrs. Weasley popped to her feet at Harry's arrival.

"Hello Harry dear," she said pulling him into a fierce hug.

"Hi Mrs. Weasley," Harry mumbled embarrassed as Fred and George made faces at him over her
shoulder. Harry rolled his eyes at him.

Mrs. Weasley pushed him away from her, "You're too skinny, dear." She fixed her glare on Harry's guardians. "Have you been feeding him at all?"

"We have," Remus reassured.

"Well, I'm here now, we'll fatten you right up." Mrs. Weasley said giving Harry's upper arms another squeeze.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry groaned.

"You've got bags under your eyes, have you been sleeping?"

Harry looked to the table for assistance. Fred and George shook their heads in unison.

Mr. Weasley came to his rescue, "Hello Harry. Come now Molly, I'm sure Remus and Sirius have been taking wonderful care of Harry." Mr. Weasley said moving from to stand next to his wife.

Harry took Mr. Weasley's hand, "Hi. I'm fine really. Remus and Sirius are looking after me, I promise."

"Of course they are dear. I'll make us some lunch." Mrs. Weasley bustled around the kitchen locating pots and pans that none of the residents knew existed. It didn't take Mrs. Weasley to whip up for the seven of them at the house. It was the best thing he had had to eat since leaving Hogwarts.

"Have you heard from Hermione," Ginny asked passing the basket of bread to George.

Harry shook his head, "Not yet. She's not supposed to leave until next month I think."

"Where's Hermione going?" Mr. Weasley asked interestedly.

"Bulgaria," said Fred.

"To see her boyfriend, Viktor," teased George, "Viktor Krum."

Ron groaned in disapproval.

"That's nice for her," Mrs. Weasley said, her tone not totally approving.

"She's going with her parents to see some of the historical places or something." Harry corrected.

That seemed to make Mrs. Weasley a bit happier. Sirius led the tour of the house after lunch. Harry and Ron were to share the room Harry currently occupied. It was one of the few that were properly cleared of troublesome objects and magical pests. Harry made sure to warn the others to lock their doors at night as Kreacher had a habit of coming in the middle of the night to "clean".

The Weasleys spent the rest of the day settling into Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore was supposed to arrive after dinner to put on the last of the wards to the house including casting the Fidelius Charm. He would also bring in the members of the Order so far.

Harry wondered how many there could be at this point. Sirius mentioned the fact that some were
certainly members during the last war, like he and Remus. Remus reminded Harry Neville's parents were also. Mrs. Weasley got a bit teary eyed when she mentioned her brothers Fabian and Gideon were members as well. Who would return was now the question.

Mrs. Weasley came up with a fabulous stew for dinner. The seven expanded to a full dozen for the evening meal. A tall, black, Auror, with a gold ear stud, Kingsley Shacklebolt, joined them. He was the first new person to join other than Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Along with Kingsley came the headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Mad-Eye Moody, and Dedalus Diggle.

Harry had actually met the top hat wearing wizard once before, at about age seven. He had bowed to Harry outside a shop. Aunt Petunia had demanded to know if Harry knew the man. When Harry said he didn't know him, she rushed them back home without even going inside to do their shopping. Harry was surprised the man didn't burst from excitement when Harry told the man he remembered him from this encounter.

Harry knew Dumbledore was considered by many to be the greatest wizard of the age, if not of all-time, but the teen had never seen the man do that complex of magic. He drew up a chair for Professor Trelawney for Christmas dinner, vanished a few things, spells most NEWT students at Hogwarts could accomplish. The Fidelius was unlike anything Harry had ever seen before.

Harry was inside the building of Number Twelve when Dumbledore cast the spell. Harry could feel it as the spell took hold. It was like the address of where they were slipped from his mind until the headmaster gave him a piece of parchment with the address in Dumbledore's own fine script announced, "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix."

"Harry," Dumbledore called as reentered the house.

Harry looked up at the man, "Yes sir?"

"Come and speak with me a moment," Dumbledore said directing them into the drawing room.

Harry followed dutifully. "I wouldn't sit down," Harry suggested as the headmaster closed the door behind Harry.

"How are you, my boy?" Dumbledore smiled the way he always did at Harry. His half-moon spectacles glinting in the firelight.

Harry shrugged.

"Have you been practicing your Occlumency?"

Harry nodded, "Yes sir."

"Good, that will be very import in the future Harry. Voldemort must not be able to enter your mind." Dumbledore said more seriously than Harry had ever heard him.

"I know. Professor Snape told me...told me the night Cedric...the night in the graveyard," Harry explained.

A look crossed Dumbledore's face Harry couldn't quite name. "Severus will be in a great deal of danger, Harry. You must do all that you can to help protect him."
Harry looked down at his shoes, "I know."

"Harry," Dumbledore said again softly, Harry looked back up at him. "My boy, I know you and Severus have formed a bond over these last several years."

Harry slumped in one himself, "He can't be there for me now. He has to make sure Voldemort or anyone doesn't think he cares about me."

"I'm sorry, my boy," Dumbledore said placing a hand on Harry's thin shoulder.

"What about my Occlumency lessons?" Harry asked.

"Those will have to end. We no longer have the cover of him helping you prepare for the upcoming task of the Triwizard Tournament. If you wish, I can assist you with them." Dumbledore offered.

Harry shook his head, "No sir, I couldn't ask you to do that. You've got," Harry motioned around the room, "all this and what's going to Hogwarts too."

"Very well, but the offer stands if you change your mind."

Harry nodded, "Thank you, sir."

Harry left the headmaster standing in the drawing room, going upstairs to Fred and George's new room. He tried to turn the knob, but the door was locked.

Harry raised a fist and tapped on the door.

"Bugger off Ron," one or both of the twins yelled, Harry couldn't tell through the distortion of the wooden door.

"It's Harry," the boy in question corrected.

Fred appeared an instant later opening the door enough to pull the younger skinny boy through the crack before shutting and locking it once more.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded. "Why did I get to come in if you told Ron to bugger off?"

"We're organizing our merchandise. We don't want Mum to know. She doesn't approve of the joke shop idea. She thinks we should do something more respectable. She's already destroyed all of our products once." George explained.

"Respectable? Like what?" Harry asked taking a seat on the right side bed.

"It used to be the Ministry. Not sure she's as hot on that idea now with you know, how Fudge took the news with You-Know-Who," said Fred. "If Percy wasn't being such an arse we wouldn't even bother going back this year."

Harry looked at him mildly confused, "What do you mean? What's Percy done?"

"He's siding with Fudge, if the Ministry says You-Know-Who isn't back, he can't possibly be back. It's like the sun shines out of Fudge's arse."
"I think he's doing it because of the job. He got a fancy promotion a couple of days ago. He spent months taking orders from owls from his Imperio-ed boss and didn't notice a thing was wrong. The Ministry lot was going to investigate him, then next you know, he's got a fancy job in the Minister of Magic's office. He wouldn't listen when Dad tried to tell him that they gave it to him since the family is close to you." George commented as he placed several long thin boxes next to Harry on the bed.

Harry frowned, "Do you think he'll come around?"

Fred shrugged, the action mirrored by his mirror image. "I think sometimes he was Sorted into the wrong house," Fred grumbled as he added more things to the piles on the bed.

"So," Harry said feeling they needed a change in topics, "What's all this?"

"Our wares, dear Harry," Fred said with a wicked grin. "This is Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the finest joke shop around. As our first backer, you're entitled to see our preliminary products.

"They're our version of wet-start fireworks. They still need work," George said sadly.

Harry nodded. Yes, he was very glad he had suggested this room for his friends. Hopefully, the others in the house would be spared any sort of disturbance from their experiments up here.

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"When does Hermione get back," Mrs. Weasley asked as they sat down for his birthday dinner.

Harry took a large helping of potatoes and passed the dish on. He was always hungry recently, it was probably due to the several inches he had grown in the weeks he had been back from Hogwarts. "Next week, I think. She's had a couple of changes in plans. Her dad wanted to go see a castle or something and Viktor had a game he invited them to," he explained

"It will nice to have her back won't it dear," Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"She goes on and on about all the places she been, six hundred years of history about some balmy old castle," Ron remarked.

"Then you don't have to listen," Fred reminded him.

"Yeah, nobody wants to hear all your questions about how wonderful Krum is, git," added his twin.
"Fred, George," Mr. Weasley chided.

"It'll be nice to finally meet her," Tonks a bright pink haired witch. She was a new member of the Order. She was only a few years older than Harry and the rest, a classmate of Charlie Weasley. She was a metamorphagus, meaning she should change her appearance at will. It was a bit of a game at dinner requesting her to make her nose into various configurations. Harry wasn't sure Mrs. Weasley totally approved, but everyone got a good laugh from it.

The dinner talk was light and pleasant. Mrs. Weasley dimmed the lights in preparation for bringing in the cake. She firmly refused to let Tonks help. The young woman may be an Auror, but she was the least coordinated person Harry had ever met. Her clumsiness had nearly stopped her from passing her Auror qualifications.

Mrs. Weasley returned a moment later, a huge dragon-shaped cake with candles already lit. Helping her carry it was Hermione. Harry blew out the candles before running over and giving his best friend a hug.

Much to Ron's horror, she spent the rest of the evening the center of conversation. She told them of meeting Krum's family, the difference in wizarding culture in Bulgaria. Even an amusing story about Krum trying to get her on his broom to fly with him. There was no talk of six hundred years of a castle's history.

After dessert, everyone headed upstairs to bed. Hermione followed Harry up to his room for a chance to speak in private. Harry hadn't done much to his room other than placing a few Gryffindor poster over top the faded Slytherin hangings. There were still the previous occupation papers and things scattered on the floor and desk. After spending his days cleaning the manner, the last thing he wanted to do was clean his room.

Hermione took a seat on Harry's bed. "How have you been? You haven't said much in your letters."

Harry shrugged sitting next to her, his back braced one of the posters. "We're not supposed to put much in there, in case the letter is intercepted."

"Harry."

The boy didn't say anything.

"Why aren't you sharing a room with Ron anymore?"

"He doesn't like being woken up in the middle of the night by someone else's nightmares." Harry had stopped sharing a room with the week or so before. Ron had complained about Harry's frequent nightmares and talking in his sleep. Harry had moved into the room across from Sirius. The room had once belonged to Sirius' younger brother, Regulus.

"Oh Harry," Hermione said softly.

Harry shrugged.

"Are they all about the graveyard?" She asked concerned.

"I don't want to talk about it, Hermione." He said it a bit more firmly than intended.
"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm just worried."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted. He shoved his anger under his shields.

"Everybody keeps asking me about it. I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm fine."

Hermione didn't want to hurt her friend anymore so changed the topic, "What do you know about what the Order is doing?"

Harry shook his head, "Not that much. There's lots of talk about guard duty and shifts. We don't know where. We've seen Professor Snape a few times, but he doesn't stay. You know how he and Sirius don't get on."

"Sirius said you've been time cleaning up the house," Hermione began.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "not that you can really tell. This place is a disaster. And that mad old house elf Kreacher isn't much help."

"Harry," Hermione chided.

"He's horrible. Just you wait and see. He's always muttering terrible things about all of us, "blood-traitors", "Mudbloods", "filth". You should hear some of the horrible things he has to say about Remus." Harry defended.

"It's not his fault, Harry. He's been alone in this house by himself for years. His masters were horribly bigoted people, he knows no better." Hermione countered.

"Whatever," grumbled Harry.

"In all this cleaning, have you found anything interesting?"
Harry chuckled, "There was this set of robes that tried to strangle Ron the other day."

"That's horrible," Hermione gasped.

"Oh yeah, it was, but after Fred and George kept making fun of him so Ron "accidentally" turned their hair green for three days," Harry said chuckling once more. "There was this weird locket not of us could get open. Sirius didn't recognize it though. Most of the stuff is pretty dark. We're not keeping anything."

Hermione nodded.

"So, how was Bulgaria?" Harry asked happy to turn things back on Hermione for awhile.

Hermione blushed slightly and told him all about the parts of her trip that she wouldn't dare share in front of Ron or the twins.

"Are you sure you're alright mate?" Fred asked.

Harry couldn't take it anymore. He needed to get out of here. He needed to breathe. He couldn't
Harry grabbed his wand and a jacket and headed out the front door. He didn't know where he was going, but it didn't matter. In a couple of months, he had been living in this house in London he hadn't explored the neighborhood at all. Sirius and Remus had taken him to Diagon Alley a week or so before, but they had Apparated there and back. He watched as Number Twelve seemed to melt between numbers eleven and thirteen.

The Muggle neighborhood that Sirius' house was located in was a bit different than Little Whinging. Harry headed aimlessly down the road. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets of his jeans. It was surprisingly cool for how dry as it had been there. He wished he thought to grab his Muggle money, not that he was sure he would spend it on. The cool night air pricked the hairs on the back of his neck.

Harry nodded as he passed a Muggle couple passed him their days shopping in hand. He turned the corner spotting a small shop maybe he could go in there and look. He kicked a can down the street, then a bit further when he caught up to it. He stopped a familiar, unsettling feeling creeping up on him.

A high cold laugh, the laugh from the graveyard, then there was the voice, Lily's last words, "Not Harry!"

Three Dementors were gliding down the street, the one closest to Harry with its rotten hand extended out to Harry.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry yelled his silver doe charging the creatures down.

"You shouldn't have done that boy," Mundungus said behind Harry.

Harry turned around. "What are you doing here?"

"I was outside smoking, minding my own business when you stormed out. I was supposed to keep an eye out, make sure you didn't get in trouble," Mundungus explained. "I didn't ask for Dementors. Go back to the house, Sirius or somebody can deal with this mess."

Harry ran down back down the road, his wand still held firmly in his fist. He didn't ponder the wonders of the magic of Number Twelve reappearing before him as he ran up the front steps. He shoved the front door open knocking over the troll leg umbrella stand. The portrait's screams and Harry's pounding competing to block out another sound.

"Harry!" Sirius said pulling the boy further into the house. "What in the name of Merlin happened. We just received an owl from the Ministry. What are you doing casting a Patronus in the middle of a Muggle street, kid?"

"The Ministry's already sent a letter?" Harry asked, his breathing returning to normal, but shoulders slumping. "Did they expel me?"

Sirius only nodded.

"Dumbledore was here, he's going to have a word them, see if he can sort things out. What happened Harry?" Remus asked leading the boy downstairs to the kitchen.
The hall was silent once more, somebody must have shut the curtains on the painting once more. A number of people were still sitting around the table. Harry's encounter and abrupt return must have disturbed the normal meeting proceedings. There were still diagrams spread across the length of the oak table. Bill shoved them away as Mrs. Weasley brought around tea for everyone.

"Drink this, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley ordered placing a full mug on the table in front of Harry. "Arthur's gone with Dumbledore to see if he can help sort out this mess. He's got some friends in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry nodded slipping his hands around the mug, thankfully for the warmth. His heart jumping into his throat at the loud cracking sound, but it was only Remus breaking up a Honeydukes Best Chocolate Bar.

"You should have some of this," the werewolf said placing a large chunk into the teen's hand.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled before biting half off. He felt the warmth return to the tips of his fingers.

"What happened Harry?" Hermione asked sitting across from her friend.

"I was walking down the lane, just going to the shops," Harry twisted the mug slightly. He wasn't looking at any of the concerned people around the table, but at the vanishing contents of his mug. "It sort of got cold, the hairs stood up on the back of my neck..."

"Did you hear the voices again?" Remus asked when Harry didn't complete his sentence.

Harry nodded.

"Oh Harry," Hermione said softly.

If the other people in the room were confused by the statement, they didn't say anything. There was a heavy silence in the room, no one sure what to say. The only sound in the kitchen the loud ticking of an ancient clock next to the pantry.

Everyone looked up anxiously as the Floo flared to life depositing Mr. Weasley in the kitchen. He brushed on the ash on his robes, paying no attention to the group of people completely fixated on his actions, just waiting for him to speak.

"What did they have to say, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley finally demanded.

"Dumbledore has got them to reinstate you, Harry, as a student. The Ministry won't be coming to collect your wand, at least not yet. However, you will have to go and speak to the head of the Magical Law Enforcement office." Mr. Weasley explained.

"That doesn't sound so bad," Ron said.

"If the head doesn't believe Harry, what could happen?" Fred asked.

"Let's not think about that now," Mr. Weasley pushed back.

"No," said Harry firmly. "I want to know."

"Harry, I don't think you need to worry about that. Just tell the truth and you'll be fine," Mr. Weasley reassured.
"Mr. Weasley, please," Harry pleaded., "Sirius, do you know?"

His godfather's expression was very dark. It always was when they talked about the Ministry of Magic. "The truth doesn't always save you, Arthur. I should know. Twelve years in Azkaban without a trial."

"Sirius, the times were different then," Mrs. Weasley dismissed. "The war had just ended."

If possible, Sirius' expression got even darker. "It's still that idiot, Fudge, in charge."

"What does that all mean for me?" Harry demanded.

Remus gave the teen's shoulders a comforting squeeze. "Arthur is right, just tell the truth, Harry."

"Don't baby him, Remus." Sirius snapped. "If they don't believe you, you'll be expelled. You could even go to Azkaban. The Ministry doesn't want to believe you at the moment, Harry. You've seen what they've been putting in the papers. They're trying to convince everyone you're mad."

"Why?" Harry sighed. "I was trying to tell people Voldemort is back."

Mr. Weasley spoke up once more, "You don't know what it was like the last time, Harry. There is no way to describe the fear, the worry. You never knew if that would be the last time you saw your friend or loved one."

"The fear of distrust," Remus said solemnly. "The fear made me believe Sirius betrayed your parents. Can you imagine a time when you would believe Hermione or Neville would betray you and join Draco?"

All of the students shook their heads. There was nothing in their experiences of their short lives that could come close to that.

"I hope you never do, but this will get worse before it gets better. If we are lucky, the Ministry will come around quickly and do their best to help us to stop Voldemort from gaining any more power." Remus said.

"When does Harry have to go see them," Hermione asked after several moments quiet contemplation.

"He'll get an official notice of the dates in a day or so," Mr. Weasley offered. "Don't worry about it. You did what was right."

Harry gave him an instead nod, "Okay."

The notice came two days later. He had a meeting with Madam Amelia Bones at nine in the morning one week later. Harry's nerves got worse the day got closer. Mrs. Weasley and Sirius tried to distract him and the others by cleaning the house and making it more livable with a renewed vigor.

Harry was glad he wasn't sharing a room with Ron anymore. He was fairly certain the other boy would have hexed him by now if they were. If it wasn't the nightmares of the graveyard, it was of Minister Fudge snapping his wand and sending him off to the Dementors. Harry spent much of the night before his appointment staring up at the faded star chart on Regulus' ceiling, unable to get to
Harry stumbled into the kitchen not long after dawn. No one else was there, the only sound coming from the ticking clock and the faint embers in the fireplace. He thought about making himself something to eat, but the very idea nauseated him. He wasn't sure how long he had been absentmindedly tracing patterns into the oak table.

Mr. Weasley was the first to come down. He put on the kettle to start the tea. He offered Harry a weak smile. He would be the one to take Harry to the Ministry this morning. The night before was the full moon. Sirius had spent the night with Remus making sure the werewolf was kept in check. Not that he really needed it. Professor Snape had provided him with a supply Wolfsbane last week. But it helped to provide Remus that extra piece of mind.

Harry wished Sirius was coming with him, but couldn't ask him to do that after such a long night. Even if Sirius could come, he wouldn't be allowed to be in the meeting with Harry Mr. Weasley explained. So Harry would be facing it alone. He could do that. He had faced Voldemort by himself surrounded by a dozen Death Eaters and survived. He could make it through one meeting with a Ministry official. Everyone in the Order said Madam Bones was very fair and would listen to what Harry had to say.

Mr. Weasley loved everything Muggle, so he insisted they take Muggle transport to the Ministry that morning. Harry helped him navigate how to use the automatic ticket machines and the Muggle currency. Harry tried not to be embarrassed by Mr. Weasley's comments about fascinating Muggle devices and pondering how Muggles managed to get by without magic.

The visitor's entrance to the Ministry of Magic looked like a normal, but rather neglected telephone booth. Mr. Weasley rang the number for the Ministry office. Where the change was normally dispensed instead issued Harry a visitor's badge with his name and the reason for visit, "juvenile delinquent".

The other wizard that worked with Mr. Weasley in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office found them as Harry registered his wand as was required. The man wanted Mr. Weasley to know they had moved up the time and changed the location of Harry's meeting. Instead of meeting in Madam Bones' office they were meeting in Courtroom Ten, a full Wizagumont panel had been assembled. They only had a little over five minutes to get there with the new start time. Mr. Weasley rushed Harry into the nearest down lift, quickly jabbing the button for five, the lowest level the lift went. They still had to run down another two flights of stairs after that. They made it to the courtroom with seconds to spare.

Harry took a deep breath and entered the chamber. Harry had never seen the inside of a wizarding courtroom. He stood at the bottom of a large room a number of witches and wizards above him. How many it was hard to say, he couldn't tell if there was anyone he knew up there, as he couldn't make out faces.

"Take a seat, Mr. Potter," a familiar voice ordered. It was Minister Fudge.

Harry looked around, there was only one seat, a heavy wooden, one with rusty manacles attached to the foot and arms. They shook threateningly as he sat, but they did not move to secure Harry to the seat.

Fudge banged his gavel several times in quick succession bringing the room to order. Harry tried to see if there was anyone he knew that might be able to help him. He saw a red head he did know
well, Percy sat next to the Minister of Magic, quill at the ready. On the other side of Fudge sat a
toad-faced woman in carnation pink. There was a smug look on her face that made Harry shift
uncomfortably.

"I, Cornelius Fudge, do hereby bring this meeting of the Wizardgamot to order on this day, the
sixteenth of August, 1995." Fudge said pompously. "Leading the proceedings along with myself is
Deputy Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Dolores Jane Umbridge. Taking notes will be
Percival Ignatius Weasley. Are you Harry James Potter, formerly of Number Four Privet Drive,
Little Whinging, Surrey, currently residing at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, London?"

"Uhh...yes," Harry said as the manacles shook once more.

"You understand this hearing has been called because you are accused of carelessly producing a
Patronus Charm at the hour of twenty thirty-five hours, on August sixth?" fudge demanded.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You are aware that all children under the age of seventeen are not allowed to perform magic outside
of school?"

"Well, yes," Harry admitted. This Fudge was very different than any of the other times Harry had
met the man.

"Two years ago you received a letter from the Improper Use of Magic Office for the illegal use of a
Hover Charm in front of your Muggle relatives? Were you not warned previously that further magic
use, especially in the presence of Muggles would warrant your expulsion from Hogwarts School of
Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

"Yes," Harry agreed again.

"Yet you proceed to produce a Patronus nonetheless?"

"How else was I supposed to get rid of the Dementors?" Harry demanded definitely.

"You produced a corporeal Patronus?" This question was not from Fudge, but a silver-haired
woman, wearing a monocle, on the opposite side of the chamber.

"What?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Corporeal," the woman repeated, "it was more than a ball of gas, it had a distinct form."

"Oh yeah, it was a doe, like it always is," Harry said nonchalantly.

The monocle fell from the woman's face, "You've produced one more than once?"

"I've been able to since the end of third year," Harry told her.

There was an excited buzz of conversation at this revelation.

Fudge slammed his gavel down once more. "Yes, yes, it's very impressive. That, however, is not
what is in question here. Why are we to believe Dementors randomly appeared on the street you
happened to be walking down in a Muggle neighborhood of London, Mr. Potter?"
"It's what happened," Harry insisted.

"Do you have any proof? A witness perhaps?" Fudge asked.

"He does," Dumbledore said appearing at Harry's side.

The room burst into applause. Dumbledore bowed slightly.

"Ahhh, Dumbledore, I see you received my owl about the change of location." Fudge mumbled darkly.

"As it happens, I did not. Luckily, I was here on another matter, and one of the Aurors was good enough to tell me where I might find Madam Bones," replied Dumbledore. "It's most unusual a matter of underage use of magic would warrant such a trial, Cornelius."

"Yes well, extraordinary times, and all that," Fudge grumbled.
"You said the boy has a witness?"

"He is waiting outside," Dumbledore confirmed.

The doors opened to let in a very ruffled looking Mundungus.
"State your name and occupation for the record sir," Fudge ordered.

"It's Mundungus Fletcher isn't it?" Mundungus said as Dumbledore placed the man in a newly drawn up chair.

"Your occupation, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Well, you could say I'm a businessman," Mundungus said uneasily.

"I would like to note for the record, this man has been found guilty of several crimes against the Ministry. He has spent months in Azkaban for theft and other crimes." The toad-faced woman, Umbridge interested.

"Noted," Percy said, his quill never pausing.

"You witnessed the incident, Mr. Fletcher," Madam Bones asked.

"Of course, I did. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't wouldn't I?" Mundungus said looking at the head of Magical Law Enforcement.

"What were you doing that evening? How did you come to see it?" The woman asked.

"I was outside the house, having a smoke. The boy comes tearing out of the house in a right state. His uncle is a friend o' mine. He says the boy's right pissed off. An' asks me to keep an eye on him since he don't know the neighborhood. I follow so he don't get too mad at me too. I come around the corner and there's that feeling. That cold feeling, like you'll never be happy again. I know right what it is. Like that, toad says, I been there before. But the boy don't care. He just pulled his wand and his great deer thing chased them off." Mundungus explained.

"You see," Dumbledore said raising from his own seat, "Harry acted perfectly within the law."
"Hear here, Dumbledore. You are not running this trial. You can't call for its dismissal." Fudge said rather petulantly.

"But I can," Madam Bones spoke up. "All those in favor of dismissal?"

All but a few went up. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't felt his worry free in ages.

"Come now, Harry. I'm sure there a many waiting for you to celebrate at home." Dumbledore gestured to the door.

Dumbledore was right, it seemed every member of the Order at least stopped by to congratulate Harry, but the teen wasn't the only person with something to celebrate. Hermione and Ron were both made Prefects for their year. Harry wasn't at all surprised by Hermione's appointment. Ron on the head, everyone seemed a bit shocked by that one. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were so thrilled, they bought him a new broom as a reward.

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Summer came to an end with the normal amount of chaos. Everyone was trying to find things that they had misplaced. Harry was fairly certain that Kreacher had hidden some of his things. The elf didn't like the fact Harry was sleeping in Regulus' old bedroom. Sirius said that his brother was always the old elf's favorite person.

The four Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were escorted to King’s Cross station by a large contingent of Order members. Moody wore a long duster coat and a battered bowler hat pulled over his magical eye. The small miracle was they had managed to get hold of several cars, so at least they didn't have to take everyone's trunks and owls on the underground.

Harry was pulled by Moody through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. The Auror found the nearest empty compartment and put Harry's truck in the rack as the others made their way on the platform. Harry looked around trying to spot Neville.

"Hullo Harry," Luna said appearing from the crowd.

"Hi Luna," Harry greeted.

"I'm not the one you're looking for," she observed.

"Errr... I was trying to find my friend Neville," he admitted. "But you should come and sit with us."

"Harry," Hermione called him back.

"I'll be right back," Harry said before rejoining his group.

"Moody's got us a compartment right in the middle of the train," Harry informed Hermione.

"I'm not sure I can sit with you, Harry," Hermione said sadly.

"The Prefects have a compartment up by the driver. I'll come and join you if I have a chance."
Harry's shoulders slumped. "Okay, of course, I'll see you later." It occurred to Harry then he had never had a ride on the Hogwarts Express that Hermione and Neville were with him. He tried to sound casual, as he asked, "Have you seen Neville?"

Hermione pointed down the platform. There was the unmistakable form of Neville's gran in her vulture-topped hat. Harry slipped past Mr. Weasley to guide his friend and Mrs. Longbottom to join the rest of them.

"Potter," Mrs. Longbottom greeted Harry.

"Good morning ma'am," Harry said taking her claw-like hand. "You've been getting yourself in the papers more than usual," she remarked.

Harry shrugged, "I'm not trying to."

"Of course you aren't, those idiots in the Ministry wouldn't know rabid hippogriff it walked into the Ministry and filled out the paperwork itself."

"Gran," Neville moaned.

"I have no doubt what you told that fool, Fudge, the truth." Mrs. Longbottom said squeezing Harry's hand. "You stay true to your word. You'll show them they're wrong soon enough."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said as she finally let go of his hands. "We all back over this way," he said to Neville. Remus helped to carry the other boy's trunk into the compartment. Luna was seated next to the window a pair of multicolored paper spectacles on her face as she read her magazine upside down. She said hello, to the former professor, it was the first time she had seen him since he left Hogwarts at the end of Harry's third year. The two talked for a moment the truth of the man's condition clearly not impacting her impression. Harry wasn't surprised but was relieved the two got on so well.

Neville joined Harry and Luna in the compartment as Remus made his way back to the platform. Ginny joined them a moment later. The train began to move quickly gathering speed. The trip north was filled with the happenings of the summer. Luna and her father made a trip to the continent looking for Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Neville's was the normal trips to see his extended family. There was a great deal of tension between those who believed what Harry had to say about Voldemort and those who didn't.

Hermione joined them not long after lunch. She told them who the other house prefects were for their year. Luna made a sound of approval at the mention of Terry Boot's name.

The Welcoming Feast was the strangest Harry had attended so far in the five years he had been a student of Hogwarts. The Sorting Hat instead of singing about the various qualities of the houses encouraged them all to work together. The thing that was the most different though, was the speak given by the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Dolores Umbridge.

Harry got bored with the waffling manner of speech and instead started a game of hangman with Neville on a scrap of parchment. Hermione later explained the reason behind her speech, and even placement in the school meant the Ministry planned to interfere with the affairs of Hogwarts.
Harry groaned as he looked over his newly filled out course schedule at breakfast the next morning. "Look at this," he grumbled to Neville. "History of Magic, Potions, Divination, and Defense, this is the worst Monday ever!"

Fred and George laughed at Harry's misery.

"I think I know who our first customer will be Freddie," George said tipping his head in Harry's direction.

"I do believe you're right, Georgie," Fred agreed with a chuckle.

"Customer for what?" Neville asked.

"Skiving Snack Boxes," the twins responded in stereo.

"What are those?"

"Their treats that make you ill," started Fred. "You eat one half to start sickness up..."

"Then, as you walk to the Hospital Wing, pop the other in your mouth. You're now free spend the period however you wish."

"That's horrible," Hermione chastised.

"You say that now, just you wait. This is your OWL year. By March you'll be begging for a little Nosebleed Nugget." Fred countered.

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Oh yeah," said George. "You're guaranteed to see at least three genuine breakdowns before the end of term. One boy in our year even broke out in boils."

"That was because we put itching powder in his pajamas pants," Fred reminded his twin.

"Oh, right, I forgot about that," muttered George. "Still, they're a bloody nightmare."

"Are they really that important?" Harry asked.

Even living with Sirius and Remus the last two years Harry still felt like he was missing so much. Neither of the men had discussed the exams with him. The only mention of them coming during stories about Harry's parents' time at Hogwarts.

Neville was nodding his head violently up and down. "Gran started talking to me about them in second year. Your results can affect what careers you can go into when you graduate."

"They can test you on anything you learned in the last five years," Hermione explained. "How are we supposed to know what we want to do for our careers?"

"You'll have a meeting with McGonagall later in the year. She'll give you an idea of what grades you need if you want to go on to NEWTs level classes. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have some valuable market research to conduct." Fred said excusing himself.
They watched the twins disappear out of the Great Hall.

"You're not going to try to stop them?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head, "No, not yet. They haven't done anything to break the rules yet."

Harry snorted in amusement. He knew Hermione would be keeping a close eye on their friends this year. They would have to be careful how they conducted their "valuable market research".

With a groan Harry rose, "Come on, let's get this horrible day over with."

Neville frowned, "I thought you liked Snape?"

Harry hushed his friend, leading him into an abandoned classroom. "You can't say that. It could put him in real danger."

"Sorry," Neville apologized.

Harry shook his head. "It's fine. That's why he's always so cold in class. Voldemort and the Death Eaters have to think that he hates me." Harry ignored his friend cringing at the mention of the evil wizard's moniker.

"But why?" Neville asked.

"Because if he liked me, he wouldn't turn me over to Voldemort." Harry guessed.

"Come on, we're going to be late for class," Hermione said moving the boys back into the hall as if they had not just had this serious conversation.

"Hermione, it's not like he's going to notice if we're late," Harry complained.

"But I will."

There was no point trying to argue with her there, the boys simply sped up. The trio making to the classroom before the rest of their classmates despite their slight detour. Harry did his best to keep up with the notes as Professor Binns droned on and on about Giant Wars. He knew he would have to read Hermione's after class as his attention kept slipping. Harry hadn't seen Professor Snape since before his birthday. He assumed the man had come and gone to Order meetings, but he hadn't talked to Harry since the boy boarded the train back to London at the end of last term.

"Are you okay, Harry," Hermione asked as they packed up to moved down to the dungeons for their next class.

"I'm fine," Harry insisted. He shoves the sudden anger under his Occlumency shields. His head It was starting to feel over full, like it was bowing at the edges. He shook his head to clear it. He missed the concerned look his best friends shared behind his back.

"Oh no," Neville groaned as they entered the hallway outside the classroom. Once more they had Potions with the Slytherins.

"How you feeling, Potter? Seen anymore Dementors?" Malfoy teased.

"Shut up," Harry growled.

"What? Precious Potter does want anybody to know you made it all up?" Malfoy snarked.
"Take it back, Malfoy," Harry demanded, his wand finding its way into his hand without real thought.

"Drawing a wand on a fellow student on the first day of class, Potter?" Professor Snape said coolly.

"Malfoy provoked him," Hermione said stepping forward in Harry's defense.

"No one asked you for your opinion Miss Granger. Unless you wish to join Potter serving his detention, I would suggest you keep your mouth shut."

Hermione stepped back as if struck. The class silently filed into the room finding seats quickly. Hermione had to stop Harry from adding the wrong ingredients three different times. Even with her doing her best to keep him inline, his potion was a complete disaster. He wasn't able to focus, his temper still short.

Harry's bad mood was only fueled with Professor Trelawney giving a long and complicated prediction of his imminent demise. The woman was a fraud, Harry knew that, but sometimes he wished she would predict someone else's death. By lunch, his friends were surprised Harry hadn't hexed someone one.

The trio arrived early for Defense Against the Dark Arts. The slunk into three seats of the back of the classroom, Harry wanting to be as far away from the toad as possible.

"Good afternoon class," Umbridge greeted.

There was a half-hearted reply.

"Oh, no, no." Umbridge said shaking her head in disapproval. "That simply won't do. When I say, 'Good Afternoon', you respond, 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge'. Now, let's try this again. Good afternoon class."

"Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge," the class said together.

"Good afternoon class," Umbridge replied. "You have a dangerous lack of consistency in your time in this class. You have all been exposed dangerous ideas and half-breeds. From what I can tell, the only professor who followed a Ministry approved lesson plans was Professor Quirrell."

"Nevermind he had Voldemort sticking out the back of his head," Harry interjected.

Umbridge ignored his comment. "You have been lead to believe you are in danger. This simply isn't true."

"Yeah, well, what happened to Cedric?" Harry demanded.

"The Diggory boy died in a tragic accident." Umbridge replied, turning to look at Harry the first time.

Harry scoffed, "Yeah, he was accidentally murdered."

The class silently watched exchange. None of them had heard Harry speak about what happened when he and the other teen disappeared when they reached the Triwizard Tournament.

"That's enough of that Mr. Potter," Umbridge said forcefully. "We need to return to the subject at hand. Your training in this topic is severely lacking. We must return to the basics. We will be returning to the theory of defensive magic. We will not practice in class."
"What about OWLs?" Hermione demanded.

"You didn't raise your hand, Miss Granger." Umbridge said looking daggers at Hermione.

Hermione raised her and demanded again, "What about our preparation for OWLs?"

Umbridge ignored her inquiry. Several others hands popped up.

"What about our OWLs?" Parvati asked, "How are we supposed to prepare for the practical portion?"

"The Ministry believes that with efficient study of the theory you will be able to perform effectively." Umbridge said coolly.

"And what about if we're attacked," Harry demanded.

"And who would want to attack school children, Mr. Potter?" Umbridge asked, a sickly smile spreading across her toad-like face.

"Voldemort," Harry snapped.

"I think he would be best for you to leave, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said. "Class you are to read the first chapter of "Practical Defensive Magic"."

Harry huffed his bag onto his shoulder and collected the carnation pink note from the teacher. He shoved his aggravation under his shields, his temper almost under control once more.

"Come in," Professor McGonagall called through the door.

Harry stepped inside, shifting his bag further up his shoulder.

"What is it Potter," McGonagall asked setting aside what she was working on. She motioned for Harry to take a seat as she read the pink missive. After a moment the woman asked, "Did you really say all that?"

Harry shrugged, "I don't know what she wrote."

"That you objected to her remark that Quirrell was a qualified professor. That you proceeded to use You-Know-Who's name several times. You insisted that You-Know-Who was back despite being told to stop."

"Yes," Harry said definitely.

The woman paused for a second collecting something from one of her desk drawers. "Have a biscuit, Potter."

"Ma'am," Harry stuttered.

She shoved the tin of ginger newts at Harry. He tentatively took one.

"Did you hear what Umbridge said last night in her address to the school?" McGonagall asked looking at Harry over the rims of her square-shaped spectacles.

"There was a lot about progress for progress... The Ministry want to interfere at Hogwarts," he summarized.
"At least you listen to Miss Granger," McGonagall said with an amused snort. "That's correct, Potter. We must all be careful. We must not give them any more reason to intervene. You must control your temper."

Harry sank back into his seat, "Yes ma'am."

"She says here you are to serve detention tonight," McGonagall said looking at the paper once more.

"I can't," Harry objected.

McGonagall raised any eyebrow. "Excuse me, Mr. Potter?"

Harry sighed, "Professor Snape's already given me one."

"And what did you do to deserve that, Potter?"

"Drew my wand on Malfoy, outside the Potions classroom," Harry replied, shrinking into himself. The look on the professor's face making her displeasure clear.

"I will have a word with Professor Umbridge, I'm sure she will understand. Have another biscuit." She said pushing the tin at him once more.

Harry wished Professor Snape was as understanding as Professor McGonagall. He arrived for detention ready to face anything from sorting flubber worms to writing a five foot essay on his lack of forethought. Harry was guided from the classroom back to Professor Snape's office.

"What happened in the corridor today, Potter?" Professor Snape requested.

Harry shrugged.

"Do not give me that apathetic gesture, Potter. You are not a half-witted child. Use your words." The man scolded.

Harry hadn't heard him speak like that to him since Harry and Neville ended up in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Malfoy started it," Harry whined.

"I have already said once you are not child, Potter. I will not accept any such childish excuse." Snape growled.

"Malfoy was accusing me of lying about everything." Harry explained.

"So you chose to draw your wand?" Snape concluded.

Harry shook his head, "That sort of just happened."

The man's brow furrowed deeply in disapproval. "Did you try to Occlumency to maintain your temper?"

Harry failed to fight back another shrug. "It just happened so quickly."

"Why do you think we spent all of last term practicing, Harry? Do you think the Dark Lord is going to ask if you are ready? Do you think he will give you time to prepare yourself for a battle?" Snape demanded his temper rising as he spoke.
Harry shook his head.

"When was the last time you purposely Occluded your thoughts?"

"After I blew up at Umbridge, on the way to McGonagall's office," Harry told him truthfully.

"And why did you not, before you plowed like a drunken hippogriff with your asinine instances?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head, "It wasn't asinine. It was the truth."

"The truth matters little to the Ministry, Potter. You should realize that if not from your personnel encounter with them this summer. Then think of the mutt's tribulations. He spent a dozen years imprisoned in Azkaban for a crime he did not commit. He was never given the benefit of a trial. The Ministry's concerns are power and order." Snape explained.

Harry frowned, pondering what the man meant.

"We will spend the rest of the evening practicing your Occlumency." Snape informed Harry as he came around from behind the heavy wooden desk. Harry nodded and rose from his seat prepared to defend his mind from intrusion once more.

Professor Snape wasn't very pleased with Harry's performance during their practice. He was able to break through Harry's shields with relative easy. He seemed to more distressed however by the chaotic and anxious state of the boy's thoughts. He guided the teen through several complex exercises to help him find his focus, restoring some order. Harry just wished he could remove the memories that were the center of his trouble but the man would not let him.

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower late that night emotionally and physically drained. He was able to get one of his first nights of uninterrupted sleep since before the Third Task. It was a good thing he had gotten such a restful night's sleep. He was able to make it through all of his classes with no problems. His professors were already discussing their OWLs and how the quality of their work was inspected to improve. The problem came after classes finished for the day, in his second detention in as many days.

Harry reported to Umbridge's office after dinner. She had him sit at a small desk across from her own. She wanted to write lines, a task Harry was well familiar with having done the same for Professor Snape more than once. This time was different though. As he wrote, 'I must not tell lies', a pain shot through his hand, the words on the parchment written in blood. After a dozen such lines the words began to appear on the back of his hand, fading almost instantly. The more he wrote the longer the words stayed. When the toad finally let him go, the words were a bright red sore on the back of his hand. She gave him another three days detention so the words might seep in.

Harry rubbed his sore hand as he walked back to Gryffindor Tower. He thought about writing to Sirius, but he didn't want his godfather to think he could not handle a little pain. Hermione and Neville noticed Harry had trouble holding his quill that night, but did not say anything. When he returned the third night, his hand wrapped in a handkerchief openly bleeding, Hermione was ready for him. She had a bowl of essence of merlap for him to soak his wounded hand. It was then his friends saw the results of his detentions for the first time.

Hermione let out a horrified gasp. Neville looked almost like he wanted to be sick. Both begged him to go to Professor McGonagall or to write to Sirius. He shouldn't let the woman get away with this, but Harry stubbornly refused. He was glad when he finished his almost week of detention, the swords left a faint scar on the back of his hand.
"Potter," Professor Snape called after Harry after class the end of their second week back at Hogwarts.

Harry groaned and waved his friends off he didn't really care if he was late for Divination, let Trelawney predict somebody else's death for once.

The professor closed the door with a wave of his wand. "Explain to me why Miss Granger has requested the use of merlap essence three times in the last week. This ingredient has its uses, normally contained to medical potions. Tell me, have you and your little friends taken up illegal brewing again?"

Harry shook his head, "No sir."

"Then why did Miss Granger say she needed it for you when I found her removing it from the potions supply cupboard?"

Harry sigh, "Damn it, Hermione."

"I will have none of that talk, Potter," Snape warned.

"She was trying to help me. My hand has been sore after my detentions with Umbridge," Harry explained.

"And why did you not simply go see a qualified medical professional? Madam Pomfrey is more than capable of tending to a sore hand."

Harry shrugged not caring how much it would annoy the man in front of him.

"Potter," Snape warned

"I didn't think it was that important " Harry tried.

"Try again, Harry."

With another sigh Harry said, "I didn't want Sirius getting mad and in trouble. He's so busy with the Order now."

"Too busy to tend to the affairs of his godson?" Snape asked. "Why would Black be anger, or get himself in trouble?"

Harry shrugged.

"Let me see your hand, Potter." Snape ordered.

Harry hesitated. A piercing look from the Potions Master had him lifting the scarred hand. The man’s dark eyes flashed with an anger Harry had rarely seen. There was a knock on the door. The next class was waiting to enter for their lesson.

"We will continue this later," Snape promised releasing Harry to make his way to the North Tower to hear yet another prediction of his grisly death.

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Harry was glad that Professor Snape hadn't had a chance to talk to him about everything. The start of Quidditch practices gave Harry something to look forward to and a much needed break from the stress of his academic stresses. Ron was the new Keeper for Gryffindor, joining the twins who returned to their position as Beaters. Ron wasn't as talented as his brothers but he did pretty well. Only time would tell if Angelina, the newly appointed team captain made the right choice.

The first match of the Quidditch season would be at the beginning of November. Ron had almost two months to prepare for the match. Harry had high hopes for the youngest Weasley boy. If Ron learned to not let one mistake make him lose his nerve and make more he might be as talented as Wood.

"How are we ever going to learn any of this," Neville complained as he looked something up for their latest Defense assignment.

"It's here," Hermione said pointing to the appropriate paragraph.

"It's not like it matters," Harry commented. "We can do everything we can to learn this rubbish but when it comes down to it we need to be able to practice the magic. Nobody gets a spell right the first time they try, not even you, Hermione."

"What if we could do something about that?" Hermione inquired.

Harry frowned, "What do you mean?"

"What if we could find away to practice magic?" Hermione asked.

"What?" Harry was still lost. "Umbridge doesn't want us to practice."

"Obviously, we would need a different instructor. What if you taught us defensive magic?"

"Me?" Harry repeated dumbfounded.

"You know, Hermione," George said casually, "I don't think I want to learn from someone so thick."

Harry hadn't realized the twins were listening to their conversation. They must have known about Hermione's idea before just now. "How many people do you want me to teach? Where are we supposed to do this so Umbridge doesn't know about it?" Harry blurted out. The others didn't have a chance to answer the first questions before he demanded. "Who would even want to take lessons from crazy Harry Potter?"

"Everyone thinks you're mad because you've never said what happened in the graveyard." Fred explained. "We saw you and Cedric disappear then come back after sometime. He was dead and you were going on about You-Know-Who and Death Eaters. Dumbledore tells us You-Know-Who is back and we're off on the train. They spend the summer reading about you losing it and almost getting expelled. What are they supposed to think?"

Harry shook his head, "I don't want to talk about what happened to Cedric."

"You might have to," Hermione insisted.

"No," Harry said more firmly, "not now. If people want to hear about that they can take a walk off the Astronomy Tower."

"Harry," Hermione chastised.
The boy didn't apologize.

"Hermione asked a few people. A lot of people in our year are worried we won't be able to pass our OWLs with the way Umbridge is teaching. They want to hear what you have to say." Neville rejoined the conversation as informed Harry of their friends antics.

Harry frowned, "I haven't even said I would teach you and Neville, Hermione."

Hermione gave him a mischievous smile, "But you will. I know you, Harry. You like to be the hero. You want to make sure everyone come out of this okay."

Harry hopped to his feet, pacing in front of the large stone fireplace. "If I'm teaching them to fight, I can't guarantee that everyone will be okay."

"So tell them," Hermione urged, "but don't say no before you even start."

"Yeah," Neville agreed.

Harry looked to the twins who were nodding in agreement with Hermione's statement.

"Fine," Harry reluctantly agreed. "When do you want to do this?"

"The first Hogsmeade trip is the end of next week. We can do it then, away from the castle and Umbridge." Hermione said, making it clear once more she had this planned out well ahead of speaking to Harry.

"Fine," Harry said again.

Harry left it to his friends to get the information about when and where to meet. He didn't think many people would want to come. This was worse than when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin. Seamus could barely stand to look at him. His mother almost stopped him from coming back to school because he would be sharing a room with Harry. The only thing Harry knew about the upcoming weekend was everyone is supposed to meet at the Hogshead at noon.

Harry's thoughts kept drifting to what might happen on Saturday as he worked on his potion in class on Friday. It turned a deep navy instead of the bright aquamarine that was expected.

"Zero Potter," Professor Snape said, voice full of scorn. "Perhaps detention would remind you to keep your attention on what is in front of you, not daydreaming of the Quidditch pitch."

Harry frowned, but didn't say anything. He stayed back to get the details of his latest punishment.

"You are a fool Potter," Snape said.

"What?" Harry asked confused.

"Your little friends are planning something for this weekend," Snape elaborated.

"Errrrr..." Harry hesitated. "There's nothing against the rule."

"If you wish your actions to remain under the notice, perhaps you should not draw attention by gathering in an establishment not frequented by students," Snape advised.

"So we should meet at the Three Broomsticks?"

"A knut for the boy," Snape said softly. "There is nothing suspect of students, even large groups of
students, meetings in that pub. Your actions will not draw any unwanted notice."

"Right," Harry agreed. He would have to talk to Hermione and Neville about this and soon. "Sir," he asked after a moment.

"What is it, Potter?"

"How did you know we were planning on meeting? I mean, we haven't really said that much." Harry asked nervously.

"It would seem your fellows are not as discreet as you desired. You might inform Miss Granger of this. I am sure she can come up with some fitting precautions." Snape said with a dangerous smirk. That was possibly one of the most dangerous expressions that Harry had ever seen cross the man's face and that included when Snape thought Sirius was moments away from the Dementor's Kiss.

"I'll tell her," Harry promised. "Do I still have to detention?"

"Of course," Snape said returning to his normally cool exterior. "I will see you on Sunday at noon. We can not having the students questioning how you wrangled your way out of a deserved punishment. You will start by brewing me a new batch of today's potion. If there is time, we will practice your Occlumency. I am sure your defenses will leave much to be desired."

Harry shrugged, "I've been practicing."

"We shall see," Snape said coolly. "You will be late for class, Potter."

"Yes sir," Harry said grabbing his bag.

Harry passed on Snape's advice to Hermione, Neville, and the twins at dinner. He left it to them to spread the message to those who were interested. There would be no way to be sure if they got to everyone until tomorrow. Still, they were certain they got to a majority of those they talked to before.

"I don't know about this," Harry said as they got closer to the Three Broomsticks the next day.

"Harry, everybody is waiting," Neville said.

"They just want to hear about the graveyard," Harry said starting to turn around.

"What's wrong with him," Fred asked joining Hermione and Neville.

"He's scared what people are going to want to hear," Hermione dismissed.

"Oh no, you got to face the crowd there mate," Fred slipping his arm into Harry's right. George followed his brother's lead and carried Harry into the pub.

The pub was crowned as it always was on a Hogsmeade weekend. Students were gathered around tables in two and threes.

"How do we know who wants listen to Harry?" Neville said looking around the establishment.

Harry shook of the twins hold.

"You all alright there Potter," Ernie McMillan asked.

"I'm fine," Harry reassured.
"We're all in here," the Hufflepuff gestured to a door Harry had never noticed before.

"Let me get something to drink." Harry said heading away from those gathered in the room.

Harry asked Madam Rosmerta for a mug of Butterbeer.

"Are you okay Harry," Neville asked joining his friend.

"I didn't expect that many people. There has to be two dozen people in there. They're not all Gryffindor." Harry said playing with his coin.

Neville shrugged, "I mentioned it to Hannah Abbott. She brought on Ernie and Susan. I think Luna is the one who talked to most of the Ravenclaws."

Harry nodded. He smiled and passed over his change as the barmaid handed him his drink, "Thanks."

"You ready? Hermione is just getting everyone settled in," Neville asked.

Harry nodded again. With his free hand he pushed open the door, all eyes turning to him.

"As I was saying," Hermione began again, "we're all here for the same reason. We want to learn defense properly, something we can't do with Umbridge teaching."

"So why should we let him teach us," Zacharias Smith demanded.

"He's done a better job of it than almost any teacher we've had." Fred said jumping to Harry's defense.

"And what's he teaching to fight against?"

"Voldemort," Hermione said, her voice shaking. She had never said the name before.

"The Daily Prophet says that's all rubbish," Zacharias shot back.

"Yeah, well your brains are all rubbish," countered George.

"I'm just saying, how are we to know what's happened. He hasn't told anyone about what happened in that maze. He disappeared with Cedric and then comes back with him dead."

"I'm not going to talk about that now. Voldemort is back, but if you're here to hear about what happened you can go packing," Harry finally said standing up in the middle of the room.

Zacharias stopped speaking. The intense looks from the assembled crowd only got stronger. Harry took a long breath waiting for someone else to speak.

"I don't know what you all want me to say," Harry said looking to Hermione. She smiled at him in encouragement, he continued. "I don't want to talk about what happened to Cedric. But Voldemort is back you have to believe me."

"If you're not gonna tell us what happened to Cedric then why should we believe you?" Ernie asked. "How do we know it's not just some story?"

"You really fight Dementors this summer? Do you have a corporeal Patronus?" The question this time came from a Hufflepuff girl, Susan Bones.
Harry paused, "Are you related to Madam Bones?"

Susan smiled, "She's my auntie."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I have a corporeal Patronus."

"And you fought off Dementors this summer?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed.

"Did you really draw that sword in Dumbledore's office out of the Sorting Hat?"

"Yes," Neville said. "After he killed a sixty-foot long basilisk."

Around of approval was heard muttered around the room. Harry sighed. This was all getting away from him.

"You all make it sound like I did it on my own. That's not true. I've always had loads of help. Neville and Hermione were with me when I went through the trapdoor in first year. Neville was in the Chamber of Secrets too."

"But you're the one who faced You-Know-Who and lived to tell the tale. You have a better idea of what we'll face than Umbridge ever will if you're telling us the truth." Ernie stated. Others nodded their agreement.

"Now how are we going to do this?" Angelina asked. "We can't just keep trying to ask you at the table. And what about Quidditch practices?"

"And patrol duties?" Added another student.

"There are a number of things we still need to sort out." Hermione said stepping up once more. "For today, I think we have come to a good point. All those who wish to continue you coming I need you to sign this paper before you leave."

"What's that?" Cho Chang asked.

"It's an agreement that if you join, you won't tell anyone about this group who isn't already a member." Hermione explained.

"And what if we don't sign?"

"Then you can't be a member. We can't risk Umbridge finding out what we're doing and shutting us down."

Most happily signed their names, only a few needed extra encouragement, Cho's friend, Marietta, being one of them.

"Before we all go," Hermione said rolling up the parchment once again, "we should come up with a name for this group so we can speak about without drawing too much attention."

"We Hate Umbridge," George suggested.

"Might be a bit too on the nose, mate." Fred said.

"The Defense Association?" Said Cho, "the DA for short."
Several people made noises of approval.

"No, Dumbledore's Army," corrected Ginny. "That's what she thinks we are after all."

Hermione quickly wrote the name on the parchment with a flourish before stuffing it in her bag once more.

"You're little meeting did not go unnoticed, Potter." Professor Snape informed Harry as he worked on his potion during his detention on Sunday afternoon.

"What? We did what you said. We meet at the Three Broomsticks and everything," Harry said slamming down his knife.

"Careful," Snape chastised. "As far as I know, there is no knowledge about what was said during the gathering."

Harry relaxed slightly.

"That does not stop the danger. There will most certainly be repercussions. Hurry up, you should have added the lacewing flies by now." Snape told him.

Harry's potion came out much more successful this time. The professor deemed worthy of an "E". If Harry wished to continue with his studies in the subject his work would have to improve. Harry admitted he didn't know what he wanted to do after Hogwarts. The only career he considered was an Auror. The fact it was recommended by an insane Death Eater masquerading as an insane ex-Auror didn't damper his interest. This revelation was met with an exasperated sigh from the Potions Master.

"Of course, you would follow your idiotic Gryffindor father and godfather's path," Snape said as he set aside the parchment he was working on. "Now, let us see if you managed to maintain any of your progress made last term with your Occlumency, Potter."

The professor's temper which was already short was only made worse with Harry's regression. He wanted to schedule more meetings to test Harry's skills but the teen resisted. He didn't want the man to put himself in more danger than he had already by being a member of the Order.

The meeting of Dumbledore's Army didn't go as unnoticed as the members had hoped. Umbridge issued a new decree about the only sanctioned groups being allowed to meet. Hermione had managed to quell the nerves of the members who were worried about what this would mean for the future of the group.

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Harry was doing his best to Occlude, keeping his temper in check. Some days were harder than others. He still had the occasional nightmare. Those days, or ones with greater stress, basically any day that involved Umbridge, his shields were more likely to be shaky. Professor Snape was now occasionally testing Harry's shields when he saw him in the halls, or after class.

Harry was not the only person who was having to deal with Umbridge. The woman had gotten herself appointed to a new position, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. She was auditing all the professors to see if they were doing their jobs to the "Ministry standards". Hermione pointed out that the questions the toad was asking were not about how the instructors did their jobs, but their loyalties
Defense Against the Dark Arts hadn't gotten any better. Day after day they sat silently in class taking notes from their texts. It was impossible to see how anyone in the fifth year was to pass their OWL when they could not practice the magic they were supposed to be learning. Harry wished more than once he could just hex the smug look on Umbridge's face.

It was two weeks since the first meeting of the DA and Harry was still looking for a place for the group to meet. He had gone to his best resource first, Fred and George. The boys could not think of a place secret enough, that was also large enough to hold the number of people, and had enough room to practice practical defensive magic. When the twins could not think of something, Harry turned to the only people who knew the castle better, Sirius and Remus. The Marauders knew the castle as well as the Founders, maybe even better, but they too failed to provide Harry what he was looking for.

"You are distracted, Potter." Professor Snape snapped after breaking through Harry's shields for the third time that night.

Harry was supposed to be sitting in detention for insulting Malfoy before Potions that morning. It was a convenient excuse for Harry to see the man. Even if it was on top of the points Malfoy could now take as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled as he stood.

"What has you so distracted?" Snape requested.

Harry shrugged. "We're trying to find a place to meet. Fred and George don't know a place, neither do Sirius or Remus."

"I take it you haven't bothered to ask anyone who works here." Snape observed.

Harry frowned. "What? I'm supposed to ask Filch where we can hold our secret meetings?"

"Mind your temper, that is the reason you fail so thoroughly at Occlumency." Snape snapped.

"There are members of staff that know this castle better than a delinquent you may ask. Umbridge would never bothered to ask them as she considers them beneath her."

"Who's that?" Harry asked.

"Think about it. Who can move around the castle completely without notice but can go anywhere?"

"You mean house elves? You think they have a place where we can meet?" Harry asked. This was the first lead he had from the start.

"I will leave that to you to discover. I am sure you will find out the answer in no time. That will be all for tonight." Snape said dismissing Harry.

Harry grabbed his wand and headed back toward the Tower. He thought about stopping by the kitchens, but there was a chance one of the other house elves might say something if pressured by Umbridge. Harry knew he could trust Dobby with anything.

The Common Room was almost deserted by the time Harry got back, only Hermione and Neville reminded.

"Dobby," Harry called softly.
With a pop the little elf appeared, his stack of hats teetering on his head. "Harry Potter is asking for Dobby, sir."

"Dobby," Harry greeted. "We were wondering, do you know of a place, a room, when about twenty or so people can meet in secret?"

Dobby large tennis ball sized eyes became sad, he didn't want to disappoint Harry.

"We need a place we can hide away from Umbridge," Harry explained.

"There's a room, wes call it the 'comes-and-goes'. Sometimes when Winky has been drinking lots there is a nice elf-sized bed there for her. The comes-and-goes provides yous with anything you need." Dobby explained his voice raising in excitement as he spoke.

"That's exactly what we need," Harry agreed.

"Dobby cans show Harry Potter, sir," Dobby suggested.

Harry shook his head, "No, we can't afford to get caught out after hours right now. Tell where and how exactly to access the room. If it works, we'll let the other know about as soon as possible."

Dobby did as asked. Harry skipped History of Magic the next day trying to find the room. It was little more than a large empty room when Harry first entered. As he thought of things that would be useful they started to appear, defense books, a practice dummy, cushions to sit on, everything he could possibly want. It was perfect.

They had their first meeting two days later. Hermione distributed coins to all the members that would get warm when the information changed. Harry would only need to change his for it to be repeated on all the others. The DA was underway.

Harry suddenly had more time to focus on planning what he wanted to do with the DA after Umbridge banned he and the Weasley twins from ever playing Quidditch at Hogwarts again after a fist fight with Malfoy. Harry had never looked forward to a Christmas break more. For the first time, he had a home of his own to return and people who were looking forward to seeing him. Then everything changed....
“Potter may speak with you,” Professor McGonagall said as class dismissed.

Harry sighed dramatically. He couldn’t think of a reason he would be in trouble with the stern witch but after five years he had come to know that disappointed tone.

“Do you want us to wait for you?” Neville asked as put his book away at the end of the lesson.

Harry shook his head. “This shouldn’t be too long.”

“What did you do?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged, “Who knows? I haven’t gotten detention in over a week.”

“Then how do you know it won’t take too long,” Neville pointed out.

“McGonagall is pretty good at letting you know what you did wrong right away,” Harry said mirthlessly.

Neville nodded, pulling the concerned Hermione behind him.

“May I see your hands,” McGonagall said setting aside the collected homework assignments.

Harry shifted his bag higher up on his shoulder. He held out both of his hands palms up.

“The backs, Potter,” McGonagall said firmly.

Harry turned his hands over displaying the still clear trace of the words, “I must not tell lies” on the back of his right hand.

“Professor Snape tells me that you have refused to discuss this matter with him,” McGonagall said running a finger lightly over the words.

Harry shrugged.

Looking over the tops of her square-rimmed spectacles she said, “Since Professor Umbridge is still breathing, I take it that you still have not told your godfather either.”

“I don’t want him to get in trouble,” mumbled Harry.

“What was that Potter,” McGonagall said softly.

“I don’t want Sirius to get in trouble,” Harry repeated. “It’s like you said, he’d come in here…”

“Harry, I am well aware of Sirius Black’s temper. I also know he would wish to know if someone was hurting his godchild. You realize this was done with a dark artifact?”

Harry shook his head, he had guessed it but no one had said as much.

“She will not be allowed to do this to you again,” McGonagall informed him.
“Professor,” Harry protested.

“I will not see that woman, harm any more students, Potter."

Harry nodded, “Yes ma’am.”

Harry didn’t get to see the confrontation between McGonagall and Umbridge but Lee Jordan heard raised voices coming from the Defense instructors office. Harry was disappointed to see the black quill on the desk waiting for him once more when he received his next detention. He almost wished Hermione had never said anything. That way McGonagall would not have put herself in a more delicate position with High Inquisitor.

The DA started with the basics of defense, Disarming and Shield spells. Neville and Hermione were Harry’s best assistants as he went around the room helping those struggling with what they were working on. Many people were shocked to see how formidable Neville could be. Most of the school only saw him as Harry’s bumbling friend.

The DA was only able to hold a half a dozen meetings or so before the holiday break. Harry was looking forward to his holiday back in London. Sirius and the others would write him but they were never able to say much about what was happening in case the letters were intercepted. Harry knew that Sirius had requested a larger role in the Order since the escape but he didn’t know what that meant. It would be nice to be home and able to talk about things in person.

Harry wasn’t the only person frustrated with not being able to speak freely. Hermione had to censor her letters to Viktor. He was playing Quidditch and traveling all over the continent. They were never sure where he was, or who he might meet. He planned to see Hermione on Boxing Day as long as nothing came up.

"Alright everyone," Harry said getting everyone's attention, "I think that's enough for tonight. We'll start here again after the holiday."

He started to clean up the room a bit as Fred and George dismissed the members in twos and three as not to draw too much attention from those that might be passing by. The twins had the Marauders’ Map to make sure no one like Filch or a professor was close by.

"Can I speak with you a moment?" Cho asked Harry.

He looked up at the slightly taller girl, "Yeah. That's fine."

"I wanted to tell you 'Happy Christmas','" she said nervously.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said back uncertain what else he was supposed to say.

The Room of Requirements as the group had taken to calling their meeting place, provided its own answer to that question. The clump of mistletoe appeared above the pair's heads. Cho leaned forward placing her lips on Harry's. He stood the stalk still, unsure what to do. It didn't help that Cho seemed to be crying too. Harry pulled back from the kiss.

"I'm sorry," Cho sobbed.

"No," Harry dismissed, "It's okay. I just didn't expect it. Are you okay?"

Cho wiped her eyes with the back of her head, "I'm fine." She ran out of the room leaving Harry standing there alone and utterly confused. Harry's return to Gryffindor Tower was long and slow as he tried to understand what just happened. Maybe Hermione could explain. She was a girl, she was
good at all that emotional stuff. Harry shook his head and what he imagined what Sirius might say. "You alright mate?" Fred greeted Harry when he finally made it back to the Common Room.

"Fine," Harry reassured.

"Doesn't look like it," George said. "Looks like somebody Confunded you."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted.

"You want a tart?" Fred offered.

Harry eyed the boy suspiciously. "Are they safe?"

Hermione had yelled at the twins multiple for testing their products on younger students. Harry wouldn't be surprised if they slipped something into one of the tarts.

"Of course," Fred said with a grin. "As long as you stay away from the custard."

"Why..." Harry began but Neville erupted into bright feathers answered his uncompleted question.

The room filled with laughter as Neville malted.

"Canary Creams," George announced to the room. "Ten knuts each or three sickles for half a dozen. My brother and I will be taking pre-orders now. We also have a collection of Skiving Snack Boxes available for order."

"What happened after the meeting?" Hermione asked now Fred and George were distracted.

Harry looked away embarrassed. "Cho kissed me."

"That's nice isn't it?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged, "I don't know."

"Don't know what?" Ginny asked.

"Cho kissed Harry," Neville informed her as she sank in beside Neville.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Neville asked.

"She was crying," Harry explained.

"Of course she was," Hermione said.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"She cries all of the time," Hermione explained. "She has to be confused. She liked Cedric but she's still sad he died. Then she likes you and wants to show you she likes you."

"I didn't make her. We were just talking." Harry objected. "I think maybe she was mad too that I didn't kiss back."

"Do you like Cho?" Ginny asked.

"Yes...No...I mean she's pretty... She's good at Quidditch..." Harry stammered.

"That wasn't the question," Hermione pointed out. "Did you want her to kiss you? Do you like her
that way?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know."

"If you don't, that's fine. Harry, you just need to be honest with her." Hermione instructed.

"Right," Harry agreed. He wasn't exactly sure what to say to that. He didn't know how he felt about it any more than Cho did. Talking to Hermione and Ginny was helpful. Maybe Remus or Sirius would have an idea of what to say to her. Harry nodded to him. "Thanks, Hermione, Ginny."

"It's no problem, Harry," Hermione said with a smile.

Harry looked at his friends. Neville and Ginny had dated since they went to the Yule Ball together, almost a year before. Neville had shown Harry his anniversary gift for her on their latest trip to Hogsmeade. He wouldn't be able to give to her until after the date or had to do it early. He was still trying to make up his mind which was better. Harry was no help here.

Hermione would be better to ask, Harry reminded his friend. She and Viktor were approaching their own anniversary. Harry was the only one of the trio who was not dating. Sirius always talked about his time at Hogwarts and how many girls he dated at school. He said James was the same, that was until he started dating Harry's mum.

Harry wondered if something was maybe wrong with him. He just didn't know how to act around girls. Hermione and Ginny didn't really count, they were basically his sisters. The only girl he ever felt totally normal around was Luna. That was in part why he asked her to go to the Yule Ball with him.

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The mood of the students returning to London the next day on the train was high. Harry sat with the twins, Ginny, and Neville playing Exploding Snap while Hermione put an end to several jinx contests and an ill-advised first-years from lighting a bunch of wet start fireworks in their compartment on her rounds. Like at the start of term, about half the Order was waiting for them on the Muggle side of the barrier. They were to take the underground to get to Headquarters this evening. Harry was practically attached to Moody with Unstuckable Sticking Charm the entire length of the trip.

The one person Harry wished to see wasn't at the station, nor was he at the house when they arrived. Sirius was away on an Order mission fans, he probably wouldn't be back until next morning at earliest. Harry sighed but understood that the Order work was important.

"So what's been going on?" Harry asked as they sat down to the dinner Mrs. Weasley prepared for them.

"What do you mean, Harry?" Mr. Weasley responded serving himself a helping of potatoes.

"I want to know what's going on with the Order. I know you can't tell me anything in your letters but we're here now." Harry elaborated.

"Harry, you're not a member of the Order. We can't tell you that much." Mr. Weasley said uneasily.

"I want to join." Harry insisted.

"You're underage." Mrs. Weasley said it as if it was the end of the argument.
"So? I can fight."

"Harry no one is saying you can't," Mr. Weasley said.

"Then why can't I know?" The teen demanded.

"You're too young," Mrs. Weasley said firmly.

"I wasn't too young to face Voldemort," Harry shot back.

"Harry, that's enough," Remus interjected. "You are underage."

"Sirius would tell me what's happening."

The boy was right, his longtime friend would tell the boy. It was probably best he wasn't here tonight. Sirius would likely tell Harry everything, despite what Dumbledore told them.

Remus relented. "We can tell the basics of what is happening. When we say that's it, that's it. You have to accept that there are things you will not be told."

Harry nodded in acquiescence.

"Ginny, Fred, George, Ron, out!" Mrs. Weasley ordered.

"What! How come Harry gets to know and we don't!" Ron demanded.

"We're of age!" The twins objected together.

"I'm older than Harry." Ron pointed out. "Why does he get to know everything?"

"He doesn't," Remus said. "You heard me say I would not tell Harry everything."

"Remus, maybe we should wait until Sirius returns."

The werewolf shook his head, "He had the right to know. There is no reason to make him wait."

"Then I want to stay," Ron objected once more.

"Ron, listen to your parents," Remus begged.

"No matter how much we care for him, Harry's not our child, Ron." Mr. Weasley said sadly. "What Remus chooses to tell him is not our concern."

"Go!" Mrs. Weasley ordered.

Ron and Ginny stormed up the stairs. Harry could hear them making their way up the stairs. Mrs. Black's portrait started screaming as the passed the ground floor.

"We're not going," Fred said crossing his arms over his chest, George mirrored his actions.

"You are our children," Mrs. Weasley said firmly.

"Molly, they are of age. We can't make them go," Mr. Weasley sighed. "Fred, George, you are not to share this with Ron and Ginny. They are too young for this." The twins nodded in understanding. "Harry, can I ask the same of you?"

"I won't tell them anything," Harry promised.
Mrs. Weasley nodded her head.

"Thank you," said Mr. Weasley.

Remus took a deep breath, unsure where to begin.

Harry's questions of "Where's Sirius," gave him the starting point he was looking for. "He is on a mission for the Order. He will be back soon."

"What's he doing?"

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that."

Harry sighed. "Fine, what can you tell me?"

"You have heard members talk about guard duty?" Remus asked the boys. The boys nodded in the affirmative. "Sirius is like the rest of the members is taking his turn."

"What are they protecting?" Asked George.

"You-Know-Who wants to get his hands on...something...something that he didn't have during the last war. He is convinced this will help him win the war," Remus explained.

Fred asked, "Is it like a weapon?"

"That's enough, Remus. If you tell him much more, you might as well induct him into the Order."

Mrs. Weasley said standing up from the table.

"Sorry boys," Remus apologized, "Molly's right. That's enough for now."

"So this weapon, it's what everyone has been protecting since the summer?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Remus confirmed. "Now, how about you tell me about what you've been up to. Severus doesn't seem to know anything. You asked us about a place to meet, but never let us know how that worked out."

Harry shrugged, "Sorry, things have sort of been crazy."

Mr. Weasley went to gather the others as Mrs. Weasley started on dinner. The kitchen was filled with the excited talk of what the DA had covered so far and what Harry hoped to cover in the future until dinner. If Mrs. Weasley didn't approve, she didn't say anything.

The small group from the train station was joined by several others for dinner. Kingsley Shacklebolt joined his fellow Auror. Both had come off guard duty on what was supposed to be their days off of work. They seemed to take it in stride. Both were impressed with Harry's plans. Kingsley made several suggestions on how to change up the training routine like they did with Auror candidates, get them used to thinking on their feet not just depending on the same handful of spells.

Harry talked late into the night with the Aurors. He felt a little bad for keeping them. Tonks waved him off. She didn't like Umbridge from the Ministry. The little toad treated Tonks like a freak because she was a Metamorphmagus. If Tonks could help Harry make Umbridge's life miserable, she would gladly stay up all night. It was Harry that called it a night after nearly falling asleep in the middle of a sentence. He managed to stumble upstairs to his room before falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

"You going to spend your whole break sleeping?" A voice broke into Harry's dream of a pretty blonde girl in Quidditch robes.
Harry groaned, still drowsy. "Sirius?"

Harry’s godfather leaned lazily against the doorframe of the teen’s room. "Molly's refusing to serve breakfast until you're awake. Ron is close to eating Kreacher so it would be nice if you could wake up. Although, if Weasley ate the little creep we wouldn't have him sneaking around all the time."

Harry sat up, putting his glasses on so he could see the man properly. "When did you get home?"

"An hour or so, we had to talk to Dumbledore about what we heard. They're going to be making some security changes. It's going to affect how we do guard duty." Sirius explained.

"The security on the weapon?" Harry asked still waiting for his brain to completely engage.

"Weapon?" Sirius scoffed, "Who told you that? We're guarding a prophecy."

Harry wasn't sure he heard that correctly, he was still a bit tired. "A prophecy," he repeated.

"Yes," Sirius confirmed.

"They store prophecies? Why does it need guarding?" Harry asked.

"Voldemort wants it for some reason. Dumbledore didn't tell us exactly why he would want it. We need to make sure no Death Eaters can get to it." Sirius explained.

"Oh," Harry muttered, that made sense. He picked at the bed clothes still not ready to get up and face the morning.

"Harry," Sirius said getting his attention once more. "You need to know, I'm going on a mission in the next several days. It's likely I won't be back for several days."

"Okay," Harry said.

"I'll be back in time to open presents," Sirius reassured.

Harry nodded, "Good."

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Mrs. Weasley and Remus kept them busy decorating the house for Christmas. Harry was disappointed Sirius wasn't there to do it with them. Harry had never been allowed to participate in decorating at the Dursleys and wished he could do it with his family like they had.

The house elf heads were dressed in Santa hats and beards. The banister was lined with fairy lights made of real fairies. It was hard to believe it was the same place Harry come home to at the start of the summer.

Christmas Eve Mrs. Weasley made a large roast beef and all the trimmings. After dinner, everyone sat in the library passing a quiet evening as they digested. Harry was slaughtered in three games of chess by Ron. Fred and George were talking with Mundungus. Mrs. Weasley had felt bad for the petty criminal for not having anywhere to go, so she invited him to join them for dinner. He was spending the night and would leave for his guard duty shift after breakfast Christmas morning.
Harry woke early on Christmas morning excited to see Sirius and open presents. He grabbed his dressing gown and headed downstairs still in his pajamas. He expected to find his godfather at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, maybe reading the Daily Prophet. Instead, he found an empty room and a cold hearth.

There was no reason to go back to bed, Harry knew he wouldn't get back to sleep. He thought about making breakfast but he only knew how to the Muggle way. The kitchen in the Pureblood fanatics Black's home wasn't exactly for that. He would have to wait for Mrs. Weasley, or someone else, to make the meal.

Fred and George arrived next. The boys had already made a good amount of money on their Skiving Snack Boxes. As requested, one of their first purchases was new dress robes for Ron, per Harry's request. Harry was certain the twins were going to give their family members nicer gifts than they even received before.

"Morning," Harry greeted.

"Sirius back yet?" Asked Fred as he sat across from Harry.

Harry shook his head, "Not from what I could see. The door to his room was open. I think Kreacher might have gotten in there again."

"Good morning boys," Mr. Weasley greeted.

"Morning, Dad." "Mornin'."

"Has Sirius gotten back yet," Mr. Weasley asked as he started the tea.

Harry shook his head. "He said he'd be back in time to open presents."

Mr. Weasley nodded, "He has a little time then."

Harry shrugged.

"Don't worry, Harry. He'll be here. Now, why don't you help me with breakfast? Boys, can you set the table?"

Harry looked to the twins slightly confused. Every meal he had ever eaten at the Weasley's was made by the Mrs. Weasley.

"Dad always makes breakfast Christmas morning," George supplied to the unasked question.

Fred shrugged, "It's normally not too bad."

The Floo flared to life behind them. Everyone turned to see who had just come in.

"What? You didn't think I would miss first Christmas I get to spend with my favorite godson?" Sirius demanded in mock offense.

Harry grinned. "I'm your only godson."

"All the more reason to to be here," Sirius said with his own cocky grin. "You're making breakfast Arthur?"

"He does every year," George repeated.

Sirius hummed in acknowledgment. "If it's too bad, we can always have Kreacher whip something up."
"You should be glad Hermione wasn't here to hear you say that," Harry joked, then groaned.

"What's wrong, mate?" Asked Fred as he and George finished setting the table.

"I meant to give him that. I should go get it from upstairs." Harry said more to himself than the others assembled.

"Get what, Harry," Sirius asked for clarification.

"A Christmas present," Harry answered confusing Sirius once more.

"I thought you haven't done presents yet?"
Fred and George shook their heads.

"It's for Kreacher," Harry clarified.

"It better not be clothes." Sirius warned, "We've told her he can't be freed."

"I know," Harry reassured. "She wanted him to have something though. It's a quilt or something."

Sirius nodded in approval.

"Getting a house elf presents," George scoffed, "she's mad."

"No," Mr. Weasley disagreed. "Hermione has a point. Kreacher is a creature of his environment. He was poisoned by the family's prejudices. Even so, he deserves to be treated with kindness and respect. We could all learn from her example."

Despite all the teasing breakfast was actually pretty good. It might have been a bit simpler than what Mrs. Weasley would have made but nobody went hungry. Mr. Weasley explained how the tradition had started in the first years of their marriage. He wanted to do something nice for Mrs. Weasley, they didn't have much money for presents so he made her breakfast, then next year, he did the same thing. From there it became a tradition.

After everyone ate their fill of breakfast they all moved up to the drawing room to open presents. Harry received his usual Weasley sweater, navy blue one with a large H on it. He was glad it didn't feature anything Quidditch related. The ban was still a sore subject. He missed playing more than he would care to admit. Sirius gave him a pocket knife that could open any lock. Remus gave him a collection of defense books, mostly collected from the shelves of the library of Grimmauld Place. Harry appreciated them anyway. They would come in handy for his future plans with the DA. Hermione gave him a planner that said annoying things like "never put off what you can do today until tomorrow" every time you opened it. Neville's collection of sweets was much more satisfying.

The day was spent playing chess, exploding snap, Remus and Sirius entertaining them with stories of their misadventures while at Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley prepared a fantastic Christmas dinner of turkey and all the usual sides. Harry split a cracker and received a punching telescope, three sickles, and chocolate frog.

The fireplace flared to life as Mrs. Weasley was dishing out the Christmas pudding. A bloody Kingsley Shacklebolt stumbled into the kitchen.

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"Arthur, contact Dumbledore. He'll want to talk to him as soon as possible "Mrs. Weasley ordered her husband.

"Remus, we may need Severus' help." The man's silver wolf Patronus followed Mr. Weasley's weasel out of the house.

"Everyone out!" Mrs. Weasley barked at the assembled children. There was no argument from any of them as they hurried upstairs and out of the way.

"What happened to him?" Harry asked his friends.

Ron shook his head, "I don't. Maybe he was in a duel?"

"Maybe," Harry agreed as they entered the drawing room to wait and hear an update on how Kingsley was doing.

The only sound in the room was the soft ticking of a large clock on the mantle. Ginny fell asleep leaning against Ron sitting on the sofa. The boy's head rested on the top as he tried to fight the urge to sleep. All eyes turned as the door opened. A collective disappointed sigh was heard when it turned out to only be Kreacher.

"What do you want?" Harry asked, hopeful for any sort of update.

"The boy is talking to Kreacher. Kreacher is not supposed let them know the blood-traitor is hurt," Kreacher muttered to himself.

The group stared, downtrodden at the miserable old elf.

"What are you doing in here Kreacher?" Sirius demanded.

"Kreacher doing nothing," Kreacher replied defiantly.

Sirius scoffed, "Get out, just get out." He pointed as he directed the elf out of the room.

"What's happening?" "Is Kingsley going to be okay?" "What did Dumbledore have to say?" "Do we know what happened?" All the questions were asked at once everyone trying to be heard over the others.

Sirius held up his hands, "Calm down, I can only answer a question at a time." He waited until they were all seated once more. "Molly thinks Kingsley will have some scars, but he'll be fine. He hasn't spoken but Tonks arrived a few minutes after. There's an attempted uprising at Azkaban. They're calling in all the Aurors any other Ministry personnel who wish to help. Moody already left."

"You're not going?" Harry asked surprised.

"I am," Sirius corrected. "I wanted to talk to you first."

Harry shook his head, "Don't go. Please don't go." He didn't notice his friends slipping out of the room.

"Harry," Sirius knelt in front of his godson, "I have to go. I know Azkaban better than anyone else here. They need my help."

Harry shook his head once more. "Please," he begged.

"I'll be back by morning," Sirius promised cocky grin on his face.

Harry sat up anxiously waiting for news. Mr. Weasley had gone with Sirius, Moody, and Tonks.
Remus left after Mrs. Weasley assured him she had everything under control. Mrs. Weasley had tried to force them all to go to bed but gave up quickly her own nerves in ruins. The clock ticked on mercilessly. For the first time, Harry was glad the Weasley's clock was not at headquarters. He wasn't sure he could stand Mrs. Weasley watching her husband's hand.

The Floo flared to life for the first time an hour after dawn. Tonks was back. Her vivid pink hair replaced with a damp mousey brown.

"I can't stay," Tonks gasped. "I need...St. Mungo's..." her hand was held tightly to her side.

"What's happening?" Harry demanded.

"Death Eaters," the young Auror gritted out. "Escaped. More than a dozen..."

"Oh sweet Merlin," Mrs. Weasley breathed.

"Dumbledore coming."

"Let me look at it dear," Mrs. Weasley urged.

Tonks shook her head again. "Just need to go."

"Do you want one of us to come with you?" Asked Fred speaking for the first time in hours.

"I'll be fine," Tonks reassured.

Mrs. Weasley helped her to the Floo. "Are you sure you don't want one of us to come dear?"

Tonks shook her head, "They let my mum and dad know once I check in. They all know me." Her attempt at humor falling flat. The witch disappeared in a swirl of green flames.

The house was silent once more. Not sure what else to do Mrs. Weasley started making breakfast. No one was really hungry. They sat silently at the table picking at their breakfast.

The Floo flared to life shortly before ten in the morning. Harry looked up hoping to see Sirius. His heart sank, it was Moody. The ex-Auror was followed by Bill Weasley (how Bill got to the battle was beyond Harry), several other members of the Order and a beaten and bloodied Remus. The last person out was the headmaster.

Harry sat by looking at those gathered in the kitchen. He didn't know what to say. He looked to Mrs. Weasley. She rang her handkerchief in her hands. There were several important people still missing. Where were Sirius and Mr. Weasley?

"Albus," Mrs. Weasley greeted.

The headmaster didn't say anything as he took a seat at the scrubbed kitchen table others followed suit, not sure what else to do.

"The Ministry still refuses to acknowledge Voldemort has returned. This breakout will have more questioning whether the Ministry is telling them the truth." Dumbledore said as he took off his half-moon spectacles to clean them.

Many nodded in agreement.

"What can we do to make them believe us?" Bill asked. He sat next to his mother her small worn hand clutched in his large rough ones.

"That is a matter for another time. We need to discuss how we proceed from here." Dumbledore
"How come we didn't know this was coming," a witch Harry recognized from her coming and going to meetings during the summer, but he didn't know the name of asked.

"Our intelligence into the plans of the other side is not perfect. Our source only learned of this attack this evening when the Dark Mark burned. They had no way to warn the Order." Dumbledore explained.

Someone made a sound of disapproval. They didn't seem to believe either the headmaster or the informant. Harry was almost certain the man was talking about Snape, why he didn't just say the name was beyond Harry. Snape wasn't here either. Was he still with the Death Eaters or maybe he was with Sirius and Mr. Weasley?

Harry looked to his Remus, the werewolf used his sleeve to wipe away a bit of the blood from the cut over his eyelid. There was a lost look on the man's face Harry couldn't name. How come people hadn't protested about Harry and the others who were not yet of age still being here as they discussed Order business? Why wasn't anyone saying anything?

"Where's Dad?" Ron finally asked breaking the silence that had fallen.

If possible the silence got heavier. Harry looked to Remus, who looked away. No one spoke.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry tried this time.

"We don't know," Remus admitted softly. "He was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange on the third tier... She was armed...They must have broken into where they store the imprisoned wands... It's a ridiculous system... Maybe she stole it from one of the guards..."

"Remus," Bill said refocusing the man's story.

Remus looked at his hands, it was as if he was looking past them. "The fight was not going well, for either side. Several of those trying to escape were recaptured immediately. Rabastan Lestrange was hit by one of Moody's Stunning Spells and fell four stories."

"What about Sirius?" Harry asked again.

"He...he's..." Remus could not make himself say the words.

"They took him," Bill supplied, his long ponytail bounced as he shook his head.

Harry's heart hit the floor. Sirius was captured by the Death Eaters. There was no way to know where they had taken him.

"You're going to find him?" Harry demanded. His voice was not forceful, it was the plea of a terrified child.

"Harry," Remus said his voice cracking on the name.

"Did they take Dad too?" Fred asked.

"Arthur? Where's my Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley inquired. It was as if for the first time she noticed the balding wizard was not in the room.

Bill pulled his mother into his chest, "Mum. I'm so sorry." That was all he needed to say.
Mrs. Weasley broke, her sobs filling the vast kitchen. Fred and George leaned against each other as the tears broke onto their normally jovial faces. Ginny curled into a ball on the floor of the kitchen where she sat.


"I'm sorry," a wizard Harry didn't know tried to place a comforting hand on the teen's shoulder, only to be shrugged off.

Mr. Weasley was gone. Sirius could be too, they had no way to know at this point. What were they supposed to do now?

"The disappearance and uncertainty of the owner's fate put the future of this location's suitability into question. It would be best if we were to leave Number Twelve until Sirius returns." Dumbledore said.

Harry was grateful the man did not continue that sentence. Sirius would be back, he promised.

"Molly, I am sorry to bring this up at such a time. However, it is something of which we have little. We must leave headquarters as soon as possible. We can not risk being caught if Sirius were to break under duress."

Bill nodded. "We understand. We'll start at once."

Dumbledore rose. "I am sorry again."

The others began to collect things, plans, and blueprints, books, and other Order materials. Where they were going Harry didn't know, nor particularly care at the moment.

"Harry, if you could come with me?" Dumbledore requested as he went not for the fireplace, but the door out of the kitchen.

Harry followed the man out into the hall. He was secretly glad the door closing silenced the heartbreaking sobs of Mrs. Weasley.

"You will need to return with me to the castle, Harry," Dumbledore told him.

"Can't I go with the Weasleys?" Harry asked.

"This is a difficult time for them. The Burrow is not properly secured."

There was nothing the teen could say to that, so he nodded. The doorbell ringing set off a wave of screams from the portrait of Sirius' mother.

Harry groaned, "That'll be Hermione." He walked to the door to let in his friend.

"Happy..." her greeting died on her lips as she took in Harry's worn features. "What's wrong?"

Harry shook his head.

"Good morning, Miss Granger. You can join Harry in our return to the castle." Dumbledore said.

"Castle?" Hermione repeated.

"There is little time to explain here. I will explain all when we are Hogwarts once more." Dumbledore said in a gentle, but firm manner.
The two followed the headmaster into the library as he collected an innocuous looking book. It glowed blue when the headmaster tapped his wand to it and muttered "Portis".

"Have you both used a Portkey before?" Dumbledore asked. If it were any other day, or to any other wizard, Harry might have considered making a smart remark back. Now, he was too tired. Too much had happened in the last few hours. His Occlumency shields weighed heavily on his mind. It wasn't like the other times he had used them to control his emotions. It felt like he was going to burst at the seams. This was as if someone had dropped a wet towel over his brain.

"Yes sir," Hermione confirmed.

"Good, now each of you take hold. I will ask that you remain in my office until I arrive. There is much we need to discuss," Dumbledore requested.

"Of course sir," Hermione agreed.

Harry simply grabbed hold of the book. He only had to wait about thirty seconds before he felt the familiar jolt behind his navel. The two landed hard in the center of the office. Fawkes gave a low squawk of greeting.

"Harry, what's happened?" Hermione demanded.

Harry shook his head. He couldn't explain it, let Dumbledore do the work. Harry ignored his friend's pleas for information and lay down on a small sofa tucked away in a nook between two large bookcases.

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"Harry," someone said shaking his shoulder gently. The voice was familiar, but his name sounded foreign in McGonagall's borough.

He must have fallen asleep. There was more than just Hermione here. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his back turned away from the assembled group. Remus sat in one of the ornate chairs in front of the desk, his elbows resting on his knees, supporting his lowered head. Hermione was quietly crying in the chair next to Remus.

Harry sat up and readjusted his glasses so they sat straight on his face again. He joined the rest of those gathered around the desk.

"There are several matters we need to discuss," Dumbledore stated. "Harry, you will spend the remainder of the Christmas and all of Easter holidays here. The castle is the safest place for you at the moment."

"Yes sir," Harry agreed numbly.

It still felt like a dream. Maybe last night had all been one horribly long nightmare. One look around the room was enough to tell him it was not.

"What about this summer?" Harry asked.

"That has yet to be determined," Dumbledore told him.
"I could go with Remus," Harry suggested.

The werewolf shook his head. "No, unless Sirius comes back. I can't risk you being harmed when I transform."

"I could go away during the full moon," Harry countered.

"No," Remus repeated. "My parents' house is too open. It would be impossible to put up all the necessary wards."

Harry's heart sank lower.

"Lupin makes a point. Wherever the boy is sent there will have to be strict security measures. A magical home would be a superior choice." Professor Snape observed. Harry hadn't noticed w man standing by the fireplace. His dark robes helped him blend into the walls.

"Could he not return to the Muggles?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, the protections I put in place the night I delivered Harry will have failed. He has called somewhere else home. Even if he were to return, that magic cannot be re-engaged."

Harry looked at the Potions Master again. He knew he wouldn't be able to stay with him again, not with Voldemort returned. The man was constantly on call to play his role of spy for the Order. Dumbledore said that Snape hadn't known about the upcoming breakout attempt. Why hadn't he known? He was supposed to know what Voldemort was planning. What good was a spy that didn't know anything

"We can't ask Molly," Remus said softly, "not after today."

Dumbledore agreed.

"The matter of the boy's fate can be decided later can it not?" Snape asked. "Currently, it is all hypothetical as we do not know Black's fate. Surely there are more pressing matters?"

"Of course, Severus," Dumbledore said looking around the room.  "Professor Umbridge will know what happened at the prison. She will likely try to increase her interference in the running of Hogwarts. The Ministry will try even harder to show they have control of the situation. This will provide us a window to show people what is really going on."

"People want to know," Hermione agreed. "Maybe Harry could come out and tell his version of what happened last year."

Harry looked up at the sound of his name. "Hermione, "The Daily Prophet" isn't going to listen to me."

Hermione shook her head. "Don't worry about it."

"Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said looking over her glasses, one eyebrow raised in question.

"Sorry Professor, I think it's best I don't give too many details," Hermione said shyly.

"I believe we can leave this matter in Miss Granger's capable hands, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said looking from the girl to the deputy headmistress. "Now, I would like to have a word in private with Harry."
The others filed out without a word. Remus gave Harry's shoulder a supportive squeeze as he left. Harry tried to smile but it failed halfway, making him look more nauseous.

"Severus, a word before you leave," Dumbledore said catching the headmaster before he could exit. "The matter of Occlumency," he began.

"I cannot teach the boy," Snape warned.

"I am aware, Severus. However, now more than ever, Voldemort cannot discover what we are doing." Dumbledore emphasized.

"I know sir," said Harry. He his shields were in place the heavy feeling still present. He hoped that would change.

Snape left the room, leaving Harry alone with the headmaster.

"Harry, my boy, I cannot promise you Sirius will be alright. We will do our best to rescue him." Dumbledore said solemnly.

"Sirius said they're protecting a prophecy," Harry said trying to move past his godfather's location. Harry wasn't sure how to describe the look that crossed Dumbledore's face. "It must be important if Voldemort wants it so badly. What's so special about it?"

Dumbledore frowned, "Sadly my boy, that's a different conversation for a different day."

Harry sighed, "Yes sir. Is there anything else?"

"No," Dumbledore said looking over the top of his half-moon spectacles at the teen. "I will pass on the information for Arthur Weasley's funeral as soon as we know. I am sure the family would like you there.

Harry nodded, "Yes sir." He couldn't tell the headmaster he didn't want to go. How could he face the family? "Good night, sir."

"Good night, my boy."

Harry didn't wait for the spiral staircase to carry him to bottom and to the gargoyle. He needed to move. There was so much to think about. He wandered the corridors of the empty castle in a world to himself. He stopped in front of an icy window on the floor overlooking Hagrid's cabin and the Forbidden Forest.

There was a light on in the hut. Hagrid was home. The half-giant had not returned to the castle in the fall like the other teachers. Up until the holidays, they had had a substitute, Professor Grubbly-Plank.

The silver-haired witch was an excellent teacher for Care of Magical Creatures. You were far less likely to be maimed by the subject matter in her class. The worst thing Harry could think of was Dean getting a bowtruckle bite a few days before the holidays. Even with the better lessons, and higher chance of escaping further scars, Harry missed the huge man.

Harry's feet carried him down to visit Hagrid before he considered it would have been a good idea to return to Gryffindor Tower to get his cloak and gloves. He banged on the door as he hopped from foot to foot trying to stay warm. Fang was barking inside.

"Back you dozy dog," Hagrid grumbled.
The door opened to reveal the half-giant. What little of his face wasn't covered by his huge tangled beard was covered with cuts and bruises.

"Shoulda known it was you," Hagrid muttered as he opened the door to the boy.

Harry rushed in, closing the door behind him with a snap. Grateful to be in the warmth once more he sat at the table.  
"I only been back ten minutes, you come knockin'," Hagrid observed as he set a bucket-sized mug of tea in front of Harry.  
"Where's yer cloak?"

"Uhhh..In the tower. I just sort of came down. I didn't go back to get it." Harry answered his frozen fingers wrapped around the warm ceramic.

Hagrid shook his head in disapproval. Harry shrugged as he sipped his tea.

"Where's Hermione and Neville?" Hagrid asked. "I thought you'd be visitin' Sirius for the holiday."

"Neville went home to be with his gran like always. Hermione is probably in the library studying." This was said with far less disapproval than usual.

"What's teh matter?" Hagrid demanded.

Harry shook his head. "You don't know what's happened?"

"No, I've been travelin," Hagrid admitted. "Hard to keep up with what's goin' on in the Order when yer away."

Harry didn't want to be the one to tell him. So much had happened since the start of the school year.

"There somethin' wrong?" Hagrid asked.

"What happened to your face?" Harry asked.

"Nothin'," the man said placing a large slab of foul green meat over one swollen eye.

There was knock at the door. The two sat frozen for a moment.

"Hagrid, are you in there?" It was Hermione. They breathed a sigh of relief as Harry let her into the hut.

"Oh there you are," Hermione said upon seeing Harry. "I went all over the castle looking for you."

"Sorry," Harry mumbled.

"Hi Hagrid," Hermione greeted, she gasped at seeing his abused visage. "What happened to you? Is this why you've been gone so long?"

"No," Hagrid said moving the stake slightly.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked once more.

"On a mission fer Dumbledore, like I said I'd be last summer," Hagrid said.

"You went to find the giants," Hermione guessed.
"They're not all that hard to find." Hagrid almost chuckled. He told them all about his adventures about finding and trying to convince the giants to side with their side of the war. That had been a while ago though. It didn't explain the bruises currently covering his face. When Hermione pointed that out Hagrid redirected the conversation back to what had happened in England and at Hogwarts over the last several months.

"I nearly got expelled because Dementors showed up down the road from the house in London," Harry started.

"The Ministry is trying to interfere at Hogwarts," Hermione added.

"We're organizing a resistance to Umbridge," Harry continued.

"An' what about the Order? Sirius behavin' himself?" Hagrid asked.

Harry froze, a new wave of anxiety sweeping over him.

"Harry? Harry, what's wrong?" Hagrid asked.

Hermione took his hand in hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She explained everything she knew about what happened on Christmas and into Boxing Day. The details were still vague to her but it was enough. Hagrid broke into sobs at the loss of Mr. Weasley. The wizard was always kind to the half-giant. He always was willing to help with those pesky Ministry folks.

"An' Sirius, Sirius is a fighter. He's one of the smartest in his generation. He'll find a way," Hagrid reassured.

Harry nodded mutely. He wanted to believe everyone, he did, but what if he wasn't? Sirius was the closest thing he would ever have to a dad. Where would he go if he died? Harry shook his head, shaking the thought away. He pushed his worries under his heavy shields.

Harry and Hermione said goodbye to Hagrid as night fell on the castle grounds. They had missed dinner. Hermione suggested going to the kitchens to get something to eat. Harry shook her off, he wasn't hungry. She pointed out he hadn't eaten much at breakfast either. Still, Harry refused. He wasn't hungry, there was no reason to try and force him to eat.

The castle was practically empty as most of the students were still with their families for the holidays. Harry wished there were classes to distract him. Now, there was nothing to do but prepare for their OWLs and worry about where Sirius might be and what could be happening to him. Hermione tried to get him to focus on the first.

Professor McGonagall found them a couple of days after their return. She didn't have any more information on Sirius. Mr. Weasley's funeral would be the following afternoon. They were to report to her office at midday so they could Floo from her office.

Harry didn't know what to expect of a wizard's funeral. He had never been to a Muggle one either. The only people he had known who died were his parents, if they had a funeral, he didn't remember it. He didn't think Aunt Petunia would have gone.

"Are you ready?" Hermione asked standing at the threshold of his the circular room that was Harry's shared bedroom.
Harry shook his head as he fumbled with his bow tie in front of the mirror. He was wearing a Muggle suit and tie Remus had gotten him this summer. It seemed a more fitting way to say farewell to the man. The only problem was he was only making a mess of the Bit of fabric at his neck.

"Stop that," Hermione said batting his hand away. She stood behind Harry and with unexpected ease tied an expert knot.
"Thanks, Hermione," Harry mumbled. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

"It wasn't from a book," Hermione said.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the unprovoked defense. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that was his first guess.

"My mum," Hermione explained. "She and my dad go to a lot of fancy dress parties. Dad always goes as James Bond."
Harry lips twitched up imagining Hermione's father ordering a martini "shaken, not stirred".

"It's ridiculous, I know. Mum isn't always there when he's getting ready, so she taught me to tie them."

"It's brilliant," Harry said with a sad smile.

Hermione had borrowed Hedwig the day before to let her parents know she was back at school after everything that happened. It was the first time Harry had ever wished he could access a telephone at the school. The delay in their response was wearing on his friend. He suggested asking Professor McGonagall if she could take the Knight Bus home for the last few days before term started but Hermione said it wasn't worth it.

The two silently walked downstairs to the Transfiguration professor's office. Professor McGonagall was waiting for them dressed in black robes.

"Mr. Potter, Miss. Granger," she greeted, her gaze fixed on Harry slightly longer than was normal. He shifted uneasily under the scrutiny. The professor broke her look to hand Hermione a pot of Floo Powder. She took some and passed it to Harry, who in turn passed it back to the professor.

Harry was the first through the fireplace. He landed gracelessly on the Weasley's hearth rug a moment later.

"Watch out there," Charlie said helping Harry to his feet.

"Thanks," Harry muttered stepping out of the way for Professor McGonagall and Hermione to come through. The room was already full of people, dressed in a mix of Muggle and wizard wear, almost everyone wearing black.

"Hello Professor," Charlie greeted McGonagall, "Mum's in the kitchen if you're looking for her."

"Tell me she isn't cooking now," McGonagall pleaded.
Charlie shrugged, "You know Mum."

McGonagall disappeared into the crowd. Hermione finally joined them a moment later.

"Hey Harry," Fred said coming up bind the pair.
Harry nodded, unsure what to say. Hermione mumbled some platitudes.
"We're all upstairs," George expanded.

There were too many people for the small house.

"Shouldn't you be receiving the guests?" Hermione asked.

Fred shook his head, "We'll do it after."

The twins lead the way up to their room. Ron sat on one of the beds, next to Luna. Ginny was on the other her face buried in Neville's shoulder. Harry sat down next to Luna. Her small hand found his instantly. Harry gave it a squeeze. Hermione sat down awkwardly next to Neville.

"When will we know when to come down?" Hermione asked.

"Bill will let us know," Percy answered. He was seated at one of the partner desks in the corner of the room.

Harry had seen him there. He was surprised by his presence as Percy had sided with the Ministry so far. Maybe the death of his father at the hand of Death Eaters had brought him around?

The silence in the room was heavy.

Harry tried not to feel relieved when Remus knocked on the door. They all shuffled out downstairs into the tent was set up in the field behind the house. The Mrs. Weasley sat in the first row of chairs. She leaned against Professor McGonagall, even from the back, Harry could tell she was crying.

The rest of the Weasleys joined their mother in the front row. Neville took the last seat in the row, Ginny still clinging to him. Luna sat to Harry to one side, Remus on his other side. Hermione was sitting next to Viktor on the other side of Luna.

Most of the heads in the crowd had the flaming red hair of the Weasleys. There were a number of others Harry recognized as members of the Order of the Phoenix, or fellow Ministry employees. There was Perkins, who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office with Mr. Weasley. There was Mr. Diggory, Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. There were more Harry didn't know.

A Ministry member got up to speak as everyone settled into their seats. Harry's thoughts drifted as people spoke. Mr. Weasley never got to use the new set of spark plugs Harry got him for Christmas. From there, he remembered the first time he ever met the wizard, working on the flying car. Most people chose to tell funny stories about the man Dumbledore was the last to speak. The headmaster's words were far more serious, speaking about what happened at the prison.

Mr. Weasley was buried beside the orchard just outside the tent. Everyone headed back to the house for lunch. Mrs. Weasley was greeting everyone as they made their way in. She pulled Harry into a tight hug as he came by. She did the same with Hermione.

Fred and George and the rest of their siblings were no longer able to hide away. They were speaking with the guests. Harry grabbed a plate of food and tried his best to hide away in a corner. Hermione and Luna found him with little trouble. Viktor had to leave, he had a Quidditch match that evening.

"Did you know Mr. Weasley well, Luna?" Hermione asked.

The blonde nodded. "He was good friends with my mother.

Father wanted us to come and pay our respects.

"Your father is here?" Hermione asked. "Can you introduce me? I have something I would like to discuss with him."
The two disappeared an instant later. Harry was alone in a room full of people.

"You should actually eat," Remus chided as he sat in Hermione's vacated chair.

"That's what Hermione keeps saying," Harry joked.

"She's a smart girl, our Hermione," Remus said with a small smile. "Harry, you must take care of yourself. Sirius would want you to."

"I know," Harry agreed, making no move to eat anything he took. Remus gestured at the plate. Harry picked up a small sandwich biting into it.

"I can not promise you anything Harry, but if Sirius is capable, he will return," Remus said.

Harry nodded, "I know."

The two sat in silence watching the others in the room.

"Remus, Dumbledore wants to speak to you," Tonks said pulling Remus away.

Eventually, Harry couldn't stand it anymore and went outside.

"Hullo," Luna greeted him once more.

"Hi," Harry muttered coming to stand next to the girl. "Mr. Weasley liked the garden gnomes. He thought they were funny."

"Their saliva has healing benefits," Luna said sagely.

Harry didn't question her strange beliefs now. "He's the first person I've known...I mean really known to... I don't remember my parents..." Harry rambled.

Luna slipped a hand into Harry's.

"He's not going to be the last. Sirius...Sirius could be go...gone now..."

The dam of tears that had refused to fall for the last several days broke. Harry let out a deep sob. Luna pulled him into a hug. She held him as he cried, just let him cry. Eventually to sobs stopped, Harry wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. "Sorry."

"There's no reason to be sorry," Luna reassured. "The people we love are always with us. Hermione wants you to talk to a reporter about what happened with You-Know-Who returning. We'll publish it in Daddy's paper."

Harry shrugged, "She thinks people will be willing to believe me if I talk about it."

"Mr. Potter, we are leaving now," McGonagall said stopping at the sliding door.

"Coming," Harry called back. Turning back to Luna said, "I'll see you at school?"

Luna stood on tiptoe and placed a kiss on his cheek. Harry walked back into the house, most of the guests had left. Mrs. Weasley sat in a squishy chair by the fire.

"Oh Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said pulling Harry into another tight embrace. "Arthur and I always thought of you as one of ours."
Harry hugged back. What could he possibly say to that?
McGonagall handed him a pouch containing Floo Powder, "Make sure you don't get too much ash on the carpet, Potter."

Harry took a handful of powder from the bag. "I'm sorry... Mr. Weasley will be missed."

Mrs. Weasley smiled at him as he threw down the Floo Powder and disappeared in a swish of green flames.

Classes started again on Monday. Harry was still not eating properly and was having trouble sleeping. He did his best to ignore the worry that still sat in the bottom of his stomach every time he thought of Sirius. He shoved it away under his heavy shields. When the nightmares of a dark, mysterious hallway started he put it down to the stress. Snape knew he was having trouble with Occluding from their random tests in the hallways, classroom, or the Great Hall. Harry was certain the Potions Master didn't know about the recurring hallway dreams. If he did, Harry was sure the man would have wanted to address them.

The four youngest Weasleys returned to classes with the rest of the school. Fred and George seemed to be funneling their grief into being more obnoxious than usual. They snuck a niffler into Umbridge's office. They stuck a boil solution into a box of sweets left for Filch. If they were studying at all at this point, Harry would be shocked to hear.

Ron had gotten into several fistfights with other boys over stupid things. He had spent almost a week in detention with Umbridge for talking back to the professor in class after she made a disparaging remark about Mr. Weasley.

Ginny was different again than her brothers. She had withdrawn into herself much like her first year at the school. She wasn't talking to many people, sitting away from others at meals, or at least she tried to. Harry and the others did their best to support their friend. It was when she hexed Neville with a bat boogie during DA meeting after asking how she was one too many times.

The next Hogsmeade visit came faster than normal it seemed to Harry. Hermione hadn't told him who was going to interview him. It really shouldn't have given he knew what material she had on Rita Skeeter. Harry did his best to keep his temper during the interview. The witch lets him tell the story in the maze and graveyard with almost no interruption. It was when she asked about Sirius and Christmas that Harry was tempted to hex her. Once the interview ended Harry excused himself to return to the castle. Walking across the barren white grounds he realized he felt just as empty.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry for the delay. I am away from home so I have fewer chances to use the internet. I am already working on the next chapter so hopefully, it won't be as delayed.
"When is your dad going to run the interview?" Harry asked Luna the Sunday afternoon after the Hogsmeade visit. The Ravenclaw had joined them at their table to study as three-fifth years worked on a complicated essay for Charms.

"If he has room after his article on the uses of crinkle-horn snack powder, the next issue," Luna said airily.

Once more Hermione kept her tongue on the strange beliefs of the girl and her father.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry rolled his quill absent-mindedly between his fingers. He shrugged.

"No news about Sirius?" Neville asked as he scratched out what he had written.

Harry shook his head, "You'd know if there was."

"What are we going to work on next in the DA?" Neville asked trying to get his friend to focus on something more positive. "We've got a pretty good handle on the basic defensive charms, Stunning, Disarming, Body-Bind."

Harry shrugged. He'd had less interest in what happened with the DA, with school, with everything since Christmas. He tried not to let it show. He forced himself eat even if he wasn't hungry. He did his homework, though it was not up to his teachers' rigorous standards. "I don't know, Neville. What do you think we should do?"

"Having a collection of hexes under our belts wouldn't be bad," Hermione suggested. "We could do things like Jelly-Legs Jinx, Bat Boggie Hex, those sorts of things."

Harry nodded, "Sounds fine. We can meet later in the week. When will your dad know if the article will run?" Harry asked Luna again.

The blonde considered the question for a long moment. "He needs Skeeter to send him the draft before next week. He should know by next week."

Harry sighed, another thing to wait on.

"Harry, are sure you're alright?" Hermione asked softly.

"I'm fine," Harry insisted shoving his assignment away.

Neville cast a nervous look to Hermione. She shook her head. Luna seemed completely unfazed as she twirled her wand in her hair. Harry took a deep breath shoving his emotions under the sodden shields.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled to his friends.

"It's fine. We know how it is mate," Neville reassured.

Harry shook his head, "No, it's not. I just.. I wish I knew something... anything... They don't even know where he might be."

"They're doing their best," Hermione said giving his head a squeeze.
Harry nodded, "I know. Thanks, Hermione." With a sigh, he pulled his homework back toward him trying to force himself to care about the assignment.

Luna informed him that the interview would, in fact, be in the next issue, her father had dropped a report on nargles for it. Harry wasn't sure how he felt about it. He wanted people to know what was really happening but was scared people wouldn't believe him. The only way to know was to wait and see.

He shouldn't have worried so much as it turned out, he was flooded with letters of support, or at least, openness to the idea of Voldemort's resurrection, as soon as it was published. Many also offered their desire for Sirius to be returned safely by his captures. Rita Skeeter had asked how Harry had come to live with the wrongly convicted man near the end of the interview. Harry had reluctantly told a much-edited version of events of the night during the end of his third year. All Skeeter took away from it was Black had not killed Pettigrew. Pettigrew had somehow miraculously survived the encounter on the street the day after the Potters were killed. Harry didn't mention the fact both Sirius and Pettigrew were unregistered Animagi. He didn't want Sirius to get in any trouble with the Ministry when he came home. Harry was doing his best to keep his thoughts positive.

Hermione suggested it, trying to get him to think of something other than his missing godfather, maybe even his upcoming exams.

The many students were curious about the interview and article published alongside it. It quickly spread around the school. The interest was only increased ten-fold with Umbridge's complete miscalculation and banned the possession of the paper. Students still owned it but charmed it so it could only be read by themselves, or made invisible until they had a moment to read it.

In response to this, Umbridge increased her pressure on the staff. She fired Trelawney and tried to remove her from the grounds. She was only stopped when Professor Dumbledore personally intervened and said that the Divination professor or ex-professor was welcome to live at the castle as long as she wished.

The other staff was placed under more scrutiny by the High Inquisitor. Umbridge spent more time monitoring classes, especially those she presumed were loyal to Dumbledore. To make sure they were not helping the DA, or teaching things contradictory to the Ministry's approved curriculum for their subject. The professors were outlawed from doing anything strictly related to their topic.

Umbridge's focus on the students became finding when and where the DA met. She started to interrogate students she suspected of membership in the DA. Harry was certain she put something in his tea when she brought him in for questioning. He only pretended to drink as she demanded answers to her questions.

Umbridge wanted to crush the group. Harry had held fewer meetings under the circumstances. Many of the meetings were being led by Hermione and Neville, Harry working one-on-one with those struggling the most with the material. That was until Hermione suggested working on Patronuses, something she was unfamiliar with. Harry agreed, even if he thought most would have difficulty with the spell.

The group was able to stay active until Cho's friend Marietta gave up their secret. Umbridge had not only threatened the girl with expulsion but the girl's mother's job at the Ministry of Magic. Harry was furious anyway. The members of the Inquisitorial Squad captured a number of members of the DA when they broke into the meeting. What was worse, was they grabbed hold of the membership list. They knew everyone who joined. Harry wasn't looking forward to Umbridge's punishment.

Umbridge took the captured Harry and marched him with her to the headmaster's office. Dumbledore took full responsibility for the club, as his name was in the title. Umbridge wished to see Dumbledore arrested, she was disappointed. The man escaped with a few choice spells knocking unconscious several Aurors and with a little help from Fawkes the phoenix.
Umbridge was made temporary headmistress with Dumbledore gone. She had her hands full with a student body that despised her, faculty that did not support her, and a castle that refused to accept her authority. The headmaster's office sealed itself, preventing the toad-faced woman from entering. Even with all of her difficulties, she managed to make life miserable for everyone.

As acting headmistress, Umbridge was finally able to fire Hagrid. She wanted to remove him from the grounds as well. She and half a dozen others went to encounter the half-giant. The Ministry officials had not countered on Professor McGonagall coming to his aide. She struck with multiple Stunning Spells. Madame Pomfrey had to accompany the Deputy Headmistress to St. Mungo's in London.

"Harry, are you sure you're alright?" Hermione asked for at least the third time that morning.

"Fine," Harry huffed, "I just didn't sleep very well." It was the truth. He had nightmares of what could be happening to Sirius. He woke up only to have new dreams about the corridor.

"Maybe you should talk to Madam Pomfrey," Neville suggested. "She can cure pretty much anything."

"There's nothing wrong with me," insisted Harry. "I just need..." Harry shook his head, "I just wish I knew where Sirius was, that he's ok."

"Okay," Neville relented.

Hermione too let the subject drop. Harry wished they forced him to go see the Mediwitch instead of going to class. He nearly fell asleep during his reading, earning a week's detention with Umbridge. Harry's hand was still recovering from his latest session with the blood quill. He got detention for his participation in the DA, like all the other members. He was certain, "I must not tell lies," would be carved into his hand for the rest of his life.

The acting headmistress held Harry up as she gave him his detention slip, making him late for Potions.

"That's ten points from Gryffindor, Potter," Snape announced as Harry slipped into his seat.

"Of course it is," Harry grumbled.

"That's five more for cheek," Snape said, his dark gaze burning into Harry.

The boy refused to make eye contact. He didn't want the man trying to poke around in his head. He didn't need the man to find out exactly why he hadn't slept well, or how often he had the dreams of that same corridor.

"Potter, stay," Snape called at the end of class. "We need to discuss your detention."

"Way to go, Potter," Malfoy remarked as he slammed into Harry on his way out of the dungeon.

Harry sighed. "You guys go on," he said to his friends. There was no reason for them to wait. He was sure the Potions Master would keep him for awhile.

"Why were you late," Snape requested.

Resigned to his fate, Harry said, "I was getting a detention slip from Umbridge."

"What did you do this time?" Snape asked as he prepared the instructions for his next class.
Harry sighed, why did it matter to the professor. Harry wasn't in his house, or any other reason Harry could think of.

"I'm waiting," Snape said, his arms crossing over his chest.

"I almost fell asleep in Umbridge's class," Harry admitted.

"Are you unwell?" The asked as he looked at the boy.

Harry shook his head, "No sir."

"Then is there another reason why you thought it was appropriate to take a nap in our acting headmistress' class?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't mean to, I just sort of started to drift off..."

"I would suggest you find a better place to find your rest. May I also suggest that you go to bed earlier if you are having trouble staying awake through your lessons." Snape offered

Harry sighed. "I didn't stay up too late. I just had a hard time sleeping."

"Why was that?"

Harry shrugged, "No reason."

"Potter, I might I suggest you take into consideration the words etched into the back of your hand when you answer that question again?" Snape said looking down meaningfully at Harry's scared right hand.

Harry's emerald gaze followed that of the professor. The boy couldn't bring himself to look up as he answered, "Nightmares. I couldn't sleep because of nightmares."

"Have you considered asking Madame Pomfrey for Dreamless Sleep, or another potion," Snape said. His tone had changed, it was no longer the strict, irritable professor, but rather the concerned caretaker, Harry only ever saw when he was in distress.

Harry shook his head. "It's fine."

"How often has this happened, Potter?" Snape requested. "Your professors have noticed a decline in the quality of your work. The opposite trend you wish to see approaching your OWLs."

"Sod the OWLs," Harry snapped. He didn't care about the damn tests at this point. They didn't matter, not when Sirius was still missing, Voldemort was out there planning who knew what, and Dumbledore wasn't even there to make sure everything all worked out. Harry said as much as more, his frustrations of the last several months bubbling to the surface.

"Why had you not told anyone of these difficulties?" Snape requested.

Harry shrugged, "Who am I supposed to tell? Sirius is missing. I can't talk to you because Voldemort or his stupid Death Eaters could find out."

Snape rolled his eyes. "There are any number of people who would listen to your problems without complaint, Potter. Your friends, Granger, or Longbottom, dare I say, even Lovegood, would listen to you blather about your misfortunes. Lupin cares for you as much as Black and is fully aware of what is happening in the Order."
He is more than capable of addressing your concerns. As for myself, our relationship, it is indeed more complex.

"You are correct, there are concerns we must address. However, that does not mean you should abstain from approaching me if you feel it is important."

"How," Harry asked.

"The elf, Dobby, still works in the castle. He could relay messages if the need arose." Snape suggested.

"Okay," Harry agreed. He collected his bag making his way up to the Great Hall for lunch.

"How long do you have detention this time?" Ron asked as Harry sat.

"Just tonight."

Ron nodded, "Got lucky."

Harry shrugged, "I guess."

Snape insisted they work on Harry’s Occlumency that evening during detention. The lesson came to an abrupt end when the Dark Mark on Snape's wrist burned. Harry was sent back to the tower immediately, told not to leave until morning. Harry left the dungeon tired and sore, his head feeling like it was being split open by a jackhammer.

Harry returned to the Tower as requested. He found Neville and Hermione reviewing for their upcoming Charms test. Harry grabbed a stack of notes reading then through, his head still aching. He couldn’t focus, the words blurred, his eyes drifted close.

Harry was back in the corridor. The door opened at his touch. He was in the room with the strange golden lights. He was so close, he would get it this time. He continued down the aisles. There were voices, he turned. A group of people stood in a circle. He knew the bloodied one in the center. It was Sirius.

"Take it down for us Black," a masked Death Eater ordered.

"Never," Sirius replied.

"Crucio," screamed another Death Eater.

Harry woke up screaming.

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione asked.

"We have to get to the Ministry of Magic," Harry said.

"Why?" Neville asked.

"They have Sirius there. They're torturing him." Harry explained. He got to his feet.

"Are you sure Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Of course," Harry said pacing in front of the fireplace.

"Shouldn't we go to a professor?" Neville suggested.
"There's no time. They're torturing him." Harry countered.

"What's with him?" Fred asked.

"He thinks You-Know-Who has Sirius in the Ministry," Hermione explained.

"How would He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named have gotten into the Ministry?" George asked.

"I don't know. They're torturing him. We have to go and save him," Harry insisted. "Dumbledore is gone. McGonagall is London because that face off when they tried to fire Hagrid. Professor Snape, he had to leave the castle."

"How are we supposed to get to the Ministry mate?" Fred asked.

Harry shrugged. "We could Floo."

"Umbridge closed all of the fireplaces but the one into her office. We'll have to break in there if we want to do that." Fred told them.

"Could you do it?" Neville asked.

"Of course we can," George replied, mortally offended.

"Sorry," Neville mumbled.

"Breaking’s not the problem. We need to a distraction to make sure we can get away." Fred explained. "Georgie and I have been thinking about leaving for some time. Our exit will distract her, no problem. We just need a little time. Do you think a few members of the DA might be willing to help?"

"Colin and Dennis will do anything if you say it's for Harry," Hermione suggested.

"Give us..." Fred looked down at his watch, "half an hour, forty minutes tops. Be ready to go when we give the signal."

"How will we know?" Neville asked.

"Don't worry, it'll be hard to miss," George said with a laugh.

Harry ran up to his dorm. He grabbed the knife Sirius gave him last Christmas, the one that could open any door and his Invisibility Cloak. He frowns, he put the shimmering fabric back into his trunk. There was no way they could all fit under it. Harry didn't even know who was coming. He picked up his DA coin and put the time to meet, ten minutes at the Room of Requirements. It wouldn't hurt to have more people on their side, that was if anyone was still checking their coins.

Harry ran back down the stairs, "Come on. We need to go."

"Where are you going?" Seamus asked.

"I need to get into Umbridge’s office," Harry admitted.

"Why didn't yah just ask?" Seamus asked, a wicked grin splitting across his freckled face.

"You want to help?" Harry asked his eyebrows rising in surprise.

"Who wouldn't want ta take the piss of that old toad face," Seamus replied.
"Great," Harry said with a grin. "Fred and George are out setting up. Go see if they need any help." Seamus, joined by Dean Thomas and Lee Jordan, and half a dozen others exiting the portrait hole.

"Are sure that's a good idea, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"If Umbridge is dealing with a dozen students out after hours and whatever Fred and George have planned she won't have time to notice us sneaking into her office," Harry explained. "We need to go to the Room of Requirements. There might be people waiting there."

Neville pulled out his coin and handed it to Hermione.

"You asked people to come there? Harry, how many people do you want coming with us?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head, "I just want them to keep Umbridge busy."

To his disappointment, there was only one person waiting for them in the Room of Requirements, Luna.

"Nobody else came?" Harry asked.

"I don't think anyone else was checking their coins. I liked the DA it was almost like having friends." Luna answered. The girl had a strange talent of speaking awkward truths. "What are you planning?"

"We need to get Umbridge away from her office," Harry explained.

"Why?"

"We need to use her fireplace. It's the only left on the Floo Network."

"Where are you going?"

"The Ministry of Magic, Voldemort has Sirius there," Harry elaborated.

Without another word, Luna lead the way down the hall.

"Is she coming with us?" Neville asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

"Why else did people join the DA? They want to help."

"Yeah, but she's the only one who came," Harry protested.

"All the more reason to bring her," Hermione said watching as the blonde hurried down the corridor.

"Okay," Harry agreed.

A loud bang from a floor or two down from where Harry and his friends stood filled the castle.

"What in the name of Merlin was that?" Neville demanded his hand placed over his heart.

"The signal I expect," said Harry.

The four made to go down the Charms corridor, but were stopped by Ginny.
"You can’t go down there," she said holding up a hand.

"Why?" Asked Hermione.

Ginny stepped aside, revealing moss covered walls, trees, and deep, murky water.

"They turned the Charms corridor to a swamp. Flitwick is going to love that."

"It really is an extraordinary bit of magic," Hermione observed.

"Thanks," Fred said s he and his twin joined the four at the end of the hall.

"Do you think it worked?" Hermione asked.

"I saw Filch running down to let the old bag know about the hall," George informed them. "Keep an eye out."

The group hid in an empty classroom down the hall from the High Inquisitor's office.

Another series of loud bangs resounded around the castle.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"That's probably Dean and Seamus with the fireworks," answered George. "Too bad we won't get to see the display."

"You can do anything you like Mr. Filch once we catch them," Umbridge said running as fast as her stumpy legs could carry her.

Harry stuck his head out the door, looking up and down to see if the coast was clear. Not seeing anyone he motioned for the others to follow behind him. He pulled the knife out of his pocket, making quick work of the lock. The seven teens snuck into the room, silently.

Ginny grabbed hold the small kitten adorned vase on top of the mantle, taking a handful of the glittering Floo Powder.

"You're not coming," George protested.

"I am too," Ginny said as she passed the vase to Luna.

"No Gin," Fred protested, "Mum will kill us if come."

Ginny pulled her wand, "Try and stop me."

"We don't have time for this," Harry said pushing Neville toward the fireplace. They could still hear an explosion coming from the castle.

Neville threw down his handful of powder and disappeared in the green flames. Luna followed immediately.

"Harry, somebody needs to know where we've gone," Hermione pointed out. "We don't know what we can be facing."

"See Gin, that's perfect. You get to stay nice and safe here at Hogwarts and Mum doesn't kill us," Fred suggested.

"Stuff it, Fred. I'm coming. Mum can deal," with that she threw down her own handful of powder
and disappeared with a flash of green.

George sighed, "Maybe we'll be lucky and the Death Eaters get us before Mum does."

Fred shook his head, "Let's go before she starts the war all by herself."

Hermione blanched at the exchange as George followed by Fred left.

"It'll be fine, Hermione. They're only kidding." Harry tried to reassure.

"Who are we going to tell?" She asked.

"Dobby," Harry called.

A loud pop filled the room as the small elf appeared before the teens.

"Harry Potter, you is asking for Dobby?" The elf asked his green eyes looking up hopefully.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "We have to go. They have Sirius at the Ministry, they want him to get the prophecy."

"How is Dobby helping Harry Potter?" The elf asked confused.

"We need you to tell people where we went. Tell Professor Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape," Harry looked to Hermione for other suggestions.

"Professor Lupin," she added.

"Right," Harry added. "They'll know where we are."

There were raised voices coming down the hall, the sound of heels clicking quickly on the stone floors.

"Go Hermione," Harry urged. "Dobby, you too."

Both disappeared as he moved to the fireplace.

The voices were closer... the door to the office opened as Harry grabbed some Floo Powder.

"Potter," Umbridge hissed as the teen slipped into the fireplace. The witch's screams died as the whooshing of the flames filled Harry's ears.

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Harry stumbled out of the fireplace, hitting the cold stone floors of the lobby of the Ministry. Two pairs of arms slide under his arms, hoisting him back to his feet.

"Where to mate?" Fred asked looking around the large room.

"The lifts we need to go down by the courtrooms," Harry insisted.

The group moved silently across the floor. Harry nervously twisted his wand over and over again in
his palm. Shadows played ominously on the marble walls of the chamber in the low light.

Neville pushed the button to summon the elevator. "What floor?"

"The bottom, the lifts don't go far down as we need," Harry said as Neville jabbed the appropriate number.

The air was tight with tension as the lift moved downward. The faint sound of a tinny version of Christina Warbocker's version of "Cauldron of Red Hot Love" playing in the background doing nothing to relive it. The metal door slid open as the song ended. Harry lead the others down two flight of stairs and down the longer corridor to the door he kept seeing in his dreams. It opened at his touch.

The seven entered the dark chamber before them. The door slammed shut behind Hermione, the last one to enter. There were seven doors, which they were supposed to go through Harry did not know. He had never seen this room before. The doors spun, making it impossible to know which they had just come through.

"Which way," Neville asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I haven't seen this before."

Luna opened the door in front of them. The room was filled with a strange green light as they walked into it. In one corner was the strangest hourglass ever seen. In the top an egg, it hatched as it passed through the middle where the bird became an adult and died. The glass flipped itself over and repeated the cycle.

"This isn't right," Harry said looking around.

"These are time turners," Hermione said running a finger over the delicate instruments on a nearby self.

"This isn't the place," Harry said louder.

They exited the way they came, Hermione made sure to mark the door with a glowing "X" before it closed so they would not enter again. The doors spun again, Fred opened the door this time. They quickly determined this was not right, as they floated among a model of the solar system. Hermione marked the second door. Harry opened the next as soon as the doors stopped spinning. The glowing golden light told him at once they were in the right place.

Harry ran down the center aisle looking for the right shelves, looking for Sirius. They were so close. So close. His godfather would be there and he would be able to take him home. Everything would be like it was before Christmas. He was there, the right one.

Harry turned hard. No one was there. The aisle was empty. It didn't make sense. Harry stood silently between the two long shelves filled with glowing glass balls.

"Where is he?" He asked no one in particular.

"Are you sure this is the right aisle?" Ginny asked.

Harry nodded.

"Harry, your name's on this one," George said reading the tag of one of the small balls just above eye level. "You know anything about this?"
"Yeah, don't touch it. It's the weapon that Voldemort is after." Harry said distractedly.
In a series of pops, Death Eaters appeared everywhere around the teens. The children drew their wands as they faced the end of the Death Eaters'.

"Potter," one said stepping forward, "the Dark Lord, knows you so well." Harry didn't need to see the man's face to know who it was, it was Lucius Malfoy. "He knew you would come to save the mutt of a godfather.

Harry stepped forward, "Too scared to show your face? What did Voldemort send you to do his dirty work?"

"How dare you speak his name with that filthy Mudblood mouth!" A woman beside Malfoy screamed.

"Too scared to use his name?" Harry taunted. "Why are you here?"

"Only those who the prophecy is about may retrieve it. You can't expect the Dark Lord to walk into the Ministry of Magic. And they told me you were intelligent." Malfoy scoffed.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry demanded.

The woman let out a malicious cackle. "My blood-traitor of a cousin? How he cried, Poor bitty baby Potter."

Harry twisted his wand in his fingers, "Where is he!"

"That's not important," Malfoy dismissed. "Give us the prophecy Potter and you and your little friends can go back to school like good little children."

"Don't believe him Harry," Neville urged.

"I know Neville," Harry mumbled.

"Neville? The Longbottom brat? How are dear mummy and daddy?" The woman asked a sick smile on her face.

Neville tensed at the mention of his parents.

"Come now Potter, be a good boy," Malfoy encouraged as he stepped closer to Harry.

"You need that prophecy for your boss? I reckon he wouldn't like it too much if it was destroyed." Harry surmised.

Malfoy stopped mid step. "You wouldn't want us to hurt you and your little friends, Potter."

Harry looked at the others. "No," he admitted. Then yelled, "Run!"

The teens set off a mixture of spells at the surrounding Death Eaters. Harry sent a deliberate "Reducto" at the ball with his name on it. The voice contained within was lost in the chaos of hundreds of off others as the shelf holding was reduced to ash. The teens ran back the way they had come throwing hexes and curses behind them at the perusing henchmen. What spells were being used it was impossible to tell. The room was deafening as more prophecies crashed to the ground or were blasted apart by a misaimed spell as they ran past the shelves.

Luna screamed as one of the Death Eaters grabbed her. Harry shot a well-aimed Full Body-Bind freezing the man, his frozen form crashing to the hard stone floor.
Neville running at the head of the pack threw open the door. It did not lead to the main entrance chamber, but the space room. Hermione sealed the door as the other floated, looking for another way out.

Ginny found a door near Neptune. The seven exited into a new room, at the bottom of the silent amphitheater stood a stone arch. A thin black vail fluttered as if caught in a light breeze.

"What are those voices?" Harry asked going down several steps.

"There's nothing," Hermione snapped. "We need to keep moving." She rubbed a hand over her sore ribs.

"I can hear them too," Luna said coming to stand level with Harry.

They could hear the voices of the Death Eaters, but there was no sight of them yet.

"Come on. Hermione's right. They'll kill us if they get a hold of us," Fred urged.

"We need to get back to the castle," Hermione said.

"I'd settle for out of this room," grumbled George. He failed to suppress a shiver of unease.

The voices, the voices of the Death Eaters were getting closer. The bang of the door being blasted open brought Harry back to the moment. Once again was filled with spells.

Hermione fell as a blast of purple light hit her in the ribs. Neville fell, cutting above his eye, but continued to fight on. Fred and George fought a pair of Death Eaters, seamlessly exchanging opponents back and forth.

"Potter, wee Potter," the female Death Eater, Bellatrix Lestrange, (Harry now realized) sing songed as she drew closer to Harry. "Will you die like my coward cousin? I killed Sirius Black."

Harry's blood boiled as her words sank in. Sirius was gone. He was really gone. His home was destroyed again. Harry shot spells blindly at the witch. The witch danced past Harry's attempts.

The boy didn't notice as new faces and voices joined the room. He was too focused on the woman in front of him. He was going to kill her. He chased after her as she ran out of the arch room, back out of the entrance chamber, to the lifts. He was firing spells the whole way. None of them seemed to do have the slightest effect.

"You have to mean it, Harry," Voldemort said in the boy mind. It was like the volume was turned to eleven. The murderous wizard's voice could not have been louder if he yelled directly in Harry's ear.

Harry collapsed in pain. The room spun as Voldemort glided toward the boy.

"What would Dumbledore have to say? Precious Harry Potter trying to kill dear Bellatrix," Voldemort approached the weary teen.

"That's enough of that Tom," Dumbledore said coming around the corner of the fountain the dominated the center of the lobby. Harry watched motionlessly as Dumbledore and Voldemort battled. Harry had never seen magic like this before. Fawkes was stuck by a Killing Curse sent at the headmaster. The bird fell to the ground lifeless. Still, they battled.
Dumbledore pinned Voldemort under a broken part of one the statues from the fountain. The dark wizard remained motionless as others approached his still form.

"Why protect the boy? Love Dumbledore? What power does love have?" Voldemort demanded.

Harry screamed. His blood was boiling. His brain was splitting apart as Voldemort ripped through his mind. Memories of Sirius floated to the surface. The pain of his loss shaking Harry to his core. The tears fell from his eyes.

"You won't win," Harry tried to force the wizard out of his mind once more. He was gone as quickly as he came. "You have nothing."

More people appeared in the chamber as Harry could see straight once more. He couldn't make out what was being said. He did notice the trademark pinstriped cloak of Minister Fudge.

"There, there, Harry," Dumbledore said helping the boy sit upright. "It's alright."

"See here Dumbledore," Fudge snapped.

"I will answer all your questions in good time Minister. Now I must see my students safely back to the castle." Dumbledore handed Harry a broken part of the figures.

Harry didn't realize the professor had charmed it to a portkey until he felt the hook behind his navel. He landed hard on the floor of the of the headmaster's office. A number of portraits were woken by the racket of his arrival. He ignored the questions they tried to ask him. He didn't know the answers anyway.

Sirius was gone. He never got to say goodbye.

Harry dropped the elf head as he stumbled over to a stuffed chair in the corner. It was so cold.

Where was he to go now? He didn't have a home anymore. Remus already said he couldn't come live with him. He couldn't ask Mrs. Weasley, not after Christmas. She was still mourning Mr. Weasley she wouldn't want to deal with all the extra hassle Harry always brought.

The fireplace flared as the headmaster graceful exited, not a speck of dust on his magenta robes. The room was filled with enthusiasts applause for the return of the rightful headmaster. Dumbledore bowed. The man crossed the room and placed a tiny, naked bird in the pile of ashes that stood under Fawkes perch.

"My dear boy, I am so sorry," Dumbledore said sitting across from Harry.

"She was telling the truth then?" Harry asked softly.

"A number of Death Eaters were captured, Lucius Malfoy confirmed, Bellatrix killed Sirius some weeks back. He was tortured."

"Stop," Harry mumbled.

"They were unsuccessful. He never broke no matter..."
"STOP! IT DOESN'T MATTER! SIRIUS IS DEAD!" Harry yelled.

"Harry," Dumbledore said softly. "Sirius protected you and the Order until his dying breath."

"So," Harry demanded. He jumped to his feet a new energy found. "He's dead and he's not coming back. Why should I care what he said?"

"Harry, the Order can continue its work safe in the knowledge that Voldemort and his Death Eaters have no knowledge of our goals," Dumbledore explained. The words did nothing to ease the teen's grief.

"How did Voldemort know I would come? That I even knew where at was or what he was after?" Harry asked.

"We were betrayed," Dumbledore said softly.

"You just said..." Harry began.

"Not by Sirius, by Kreacher," Dumbledore corrected. "The elf left headquarters when Sirius ordered him out. He only returned when his master's death drew him back. In that time, he was able to tell those he stayed with a great deal, not about the Order, but of you and Sirius. It is a good thing you and Professor Snape never interacted in the house."

Harry scoffed, "So lucky."

"If Kreacher knew the true nature of your relationship with Professor Snape, his life would be in even greater danger, Harry." Dumbledore chided.

"If he's such a great spy, how come he didn't know about Sirius. Why didn't he tell us where he was?" Harry demanded.

"Professor Snape must be careful in his role, Harry. He cannot ask too many questions or he will raise suspicion," Dumbledore defeated.

"More like he didn't care. He's always hated, Sirius. He must have been happy him at his mercy." Harry growled.

"I believe nothing of the sort about Severus," Dumbledore snapped.

"Whatever," Harry said dropping into the seat once more. "Can I go now?"

Dumbledore refused, "There are things we need to discuss."

"Like what?" Harry groused.

"Where you are to live for the summer holidays?"

"Those are ages away," Harry complained.

Dumbledore tried again, " Are you not curious what the prophecy said?"

"It was lost. We'll never know," Harry objected.

"There is another copy, the memory of the person who originally heard it." Dumbledore corrected.

"Who was that?" Harry asked.
"Myself," the headmaster said softly.

Harry stared speechless at the man.

Dumbledore rose from his chair leading Harry over to the Pensive. Harry entered the memory first. Professor Trelawney sat on a threadbare wing chair, her eyes unfocused, her head thrown back. Her normal ethereal voice was replaced with a deep husk Harry had heard once before.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...."

The two returned to the office a moment later.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked. "Why would Voldemort want this?"

"This prophecy is why your parents died. Why Voldemort tried to kill you as an infant," Dumbledore explained. "One of his followers, a foolish young man overheard only part of the prophecy, that a child born at the end of July would be the one to defeat Voldemort. He had no idea what child this could be. Voldemort determined it could one of two, two boys born at the end of July, born to those opposed to him. He chose you, now he wonders if there was something he missed."

"Two boys born at the end of July? You mean Neville could be the one to defeat Voldemort?" Harry demanded. "He could have made a mistake. Neville could be the chosen one."

"No," Dumbledore said, "not now. 'He will mark him as his equal'. Your scar is not a normal cut. It is the mark of dark magic."

Harry placed a hand over the lightening bolt shaped mark on his forehead. "The rest... 'either must die at the hand of the other'? I'm going to have to kill him?"

"I'm so sorry my dear boy," Dumbledore said tears forming in his ancient blue eyes.

"I...I... Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Yes my dear boy, there is no mistake," Dumbledore confirmed.

Harry sat silently, too confused to move. He had no memory of falling asleep or how he arrived in the Hospital Wing where he woke sometime later. The sky was light if it was dawn or dusk he had no idea.

"Good day Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall greeted as Harry sat up in bed.

"Lo Professor," Harry replied.

"The Headmaster wished me to inform you of the Minister's decision. You and any of your fellows
that took part in the skirmish at the Department of Mysteries are entitled excused from taking your
exams at the usual time. You can take them at your convenience during the summer. However, you
will have to complete them before the start of next term in order to make your selections of NEWT
level subjects." McGonagall relayed carefully.

Harry didn't want to sit for any exams. He didn't care. Why should he care about school exams? He
would have to kill the evilest wizard in history.

"Did you hear me, Potter?" McGonagall asked.

Harry frowned, "I can take my OWLs this summer?"

"No, Finnegan will bring you your homework for the duration of your stay in the Hospital Wing,"
McGonagall informed. "Professor Umbridge resigned, so there will be no Defense Against the Dark
Arts for the remainder of term."

"Fine," Harry mumbled.

"If there is something you'd like to know," McGonagall asked.

Harry shook his head. The professor stood.

"Professor," Harry asked.

"Yes Potter," McGonagall asked softly.

"Do we know where... where I'm going for the summer?"

McGonagall's face fell, "I'm sorry, Potter. The headmaster is still determining the best option."

Harry nodded. The witch moved the curtain back as she left. Harry lay back down, staring at the
ceiling.

"Harry," Neville asked softly, as he pulled back the curtain.

Harry didn't make eye contact.

"I'm sorry about Sirius," Neville said.

Harry didn't respond.

"Did you see the Prophet? They're finally admitting You-Know-Who is back. The Ministry is trying
to explain everything about the last year."

Still, Harry said nothing.

Neville sighed and went back to his bed.

"He just needs time," Hermione reassured. "He'll talk when he's ready."

Harry couldn't hear what Neville said if he responded. The others tried over the course of the rest of
day. Madame Pomfrey removed the curtains just after dinner hoping it would encourage him to
interact with the others.

Seamus, Dean, and Lee Jordan came by to tell them how the escape played out. Dean explained in
great detail the giant firework dragon that swooped down and slammed Umbridge in its jaws, before
exploding in a shower of red and orange sparks. It had taken the rest of the staff several hours to
remedy the damage inflicted by the twins ingenuity. Professor Flitwick even left a small corner of the 
swamp under the window at the end of the hallway because it was such an impressive bit of magic.

"Wotcher Harry," Tonks greeted, as she joined Remus in his visit.

"Hi," Harry mumbled.

"He speaks," Tonks joked. "Madame Pomfrey said you weren't speaking to anyone."
Harry shrugged.

"We're glad," Remus told him, patting the boy's covered knee. "How are you doing?"
Harry shrugged again.

"I miss Sirius too. Like James and Lily, I always will." Remus said softly.

"Where am I going for the holidays?" Harry asked, "I can't go back to the Dursleys."

"No," Remus agreed. "With the current situation, Dumbledore thinks it's best if you stay in our 
world."

"I can't stay with you?" Harry asked.

"Harry, we've talked about this. I would not feel comfortable." Remus said.

"You were fine before," Harry protested.

"Sirius was there. He could keep me check if I transformed." Remus explained.

"What if I went away near the full moon? I could stay with somebody for those days." Harry 
suggested.

"Harry can come stay with us," Fred offered.

"We have a flat above our shop," George elaborated.

"That is a wonderful offer gentlemen," Remus said softly, "however, Harry should stay with a 
qualified witch or wizard. The property will require wards of the strictest wards."

"Our flat is in the heart of Diagon Alley," George protested.

"Maybe Harry could come visit during the holidays," Tonks offered. "Remus is right, the house or 
wherever he's staying will have to be heavily warded. You might want to have a shift of people 
keeping an eye on him too."

"Even if we were to do all that, the headmaster has a mission for me. I will be away for some time." 
Remus explained.

"You're leaving? Why? Can't somebody else go?" Harry begged.

"Not on this mission," Remus said sadly.

"You're going to find the other werewolves," Hermione guessed.
Remus nodded. "The headmaster hopes to convince some of my kind to join him. I am a ready made
"Don't say that Remus," Tonks chided.

Harry noticed the witch has slipped her hand into Remus' rough one. He frowned slightly.

"So where am I supposed to go? The Burrow?" Harry asked.

"No, the headmaster is still making a few inquiries. You'll know before you get on the train in a few weeks." Remus reassured.

Harry nodded mutely, there was no reason to protest. Like always, the adults were the ones making the decisions, Harry would simply have to go along. He was discharged from the Hospital Wing two days later.

He drifted unfocused from class to class. His classmates and professors gave him a surprising amount of space. That was except Snape.

"I have seen half-witted baboons with better potions than this," Snape remarked as he vanished away the contents of Harry second failed attempt at the potion in as many days. "If you have any desire to become an Auror you must focus. I only accept "O" level students in my class."

"What's it matter?" Harry demanded. "Who cares about OWLs and NEWTs? I have to kill Voldemort! Me. Some prat listening at a door overheard a dumb prophecy and went running to Voldemort. He chose me so I have to kill him."

"Who told you this?" Snape demanded.

"Dumbledore," Harry growled, "after the Department of Mysteries."

Snape breathed in a long breathe through his long, hooked, nose. "What the headmaster told, may be the case. However, we have no idea when that day may come. It is a better reason for you to apply yourself. The Dark Lord has powers no one else processes."

Harry scoffed.

"Do not take this lightly, Potter. You have survived on luck and the help of others. If the prophecy is true, those will come to an end. You must know all you can in order to defeat him. And you can start with brewing me a proper Draught of the Living Death."

The man had a point, Harry sighed and set back to work. It took him two more attempts before Snape was satisfied with his results.

Hermione was the only from the battle at the Department of Mysteries to sit their OWLs with the rest of their year. Fred and George had left school as soon as they were released from the Hospital Wing. They had only come back after Christmas to appease their mother. They could sit them later of they felt they required academic validation. Neville decided he could use more time to study. Harry still lacked the motivation most days, even after Snape's rousing speech. Harry like Neville would take his exams in the summer before returning for their sixth year at Hogwarts.

The end of term arrived sooner than Harry expected. He didn't care who won the Quidditch Cup, nor the House Cup. He did not attend the end of the year feast with the rest the school. He spent the time wandering the familiar stone halls of the castle. He ran into Luna once more tracking down her misplaced possession.

The train ride back to London was a solemn one, no one sure what it might bring. Luna fell asleep.
on Harry’s shoulder as he read issues of the Quibbler. There was a slight bit of commotion when Malfoy and his lackeys burst into the compartment containing Harry, Neville, Ginny, Hermione, and Luna. Malfoy was upset that his father was a prisoner of the Ministry, as were Crabbe and Goyle’s. The three boys tried to duel the former DA members with pitiful results. All three were knocked unconscious covered with odd growth from the combination of hexes. Harry with Neville’s helped shoved their attackers into an unused storage compartment down the carriage.

As promised, the headmaster found someone to take Harry in for the summer. The boy would never have thought to ask the individual. It would be very different from any summer before he was certain.

"Hello Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley greeted as he stepped off the train. "How are you holding up, dear?"

Harry nodded, "I'm fine. How are you?"

Mrs. Weasley nodded, "Oh, I'm getting there."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Mrs. Weasley said hello to the rest as she gave Neville and Ginny a moment to say their goodbyes. Meanwhile, Harry said hello to the rest of the Weasley clan who came with their mother. A number of members of the Order were here too, to escort Harry to his destination. Luna gave Harry another kiss on the cheek before Disapparating with her father. He touched his cheek awkwardly.

"Mr. Potter," Mrs. Longbottom greeted.

Harry dropped his hand away, "Mrs. Longbottom."

"Do you have all of your things?" The elderly witch asked.

"I think so," Harry said.

Mrs. Longbottom tutted in disapproval. "Dumbledore said you were polite. Neville always seems to be missing one thing or another," Mrs. Longbottom observed.

"Neville, come child."

"Yes Gran," Neville gave Ginny one more kiss and dashed to catch up with his, gran, best friend, and their escort.
Harry rolled over silencing the blaring alarm clock. The boy rubbed the remaining sleep from his emerald eyes before slipping on his round spectacles. He took another moment before getting up and making the bed. It was a habit that he hadn't shaken since leaving the Dursleys permanently over two years ago. He stumbled into the en suite bathroom and completed his morning routine. Mrs. Longbottom expected you to be completely prepared for the day once you stepped outside your door.

Harry arrived in the large dining room some twenty minutes later. His hair still messy (not that it would ever lie flat) and slightly damp from his shower. He made himself a plate from the selection on the sideboard. The Longbottom's house elves (of which there were three) were good cooks, not as good as Mrs. Weasley, or the ones at Hogwarts, but still tasty.

"Morning," Harry looked up from morning's paper and greeted as Neville entered ten minutes later.

Neville nodded as he poured himself a strong cup of tea. "Gran will be down soon. She's coming with us to the Ministry."

"Why?" Harry asked setting aside the article on the attack on a Muggle bridge by trolls and Death Eaters.

"She knows a few people I think she wants to speak with," Neville said with a shrug. "Which are we sitting today?"

"We've got the written for Charms this morning and the Divination practical after lunch," Harry answered.

"Maybe Hermione was the smart one to take them if everyone else," Neville mumbled.

"You'll be fine, Neville. We've had loads extra time, with Hermione's torturing, there's no way we can fail. Look how you did with that Strengthening Solution yesterday. Snape couldn't have given you less than an "E" on it." Harry encouraged his friend.

Harry had always known one of his friend's biggest problems was not a lack of talent, but rather, self-confidence. After living with Neville and his gran for a few weeks, he understood how Neville came to be that way. Mrs. Longbottom loved her grandson but she constantly compared him to his father. Now, after the Department of Mysteries, she was starting to realize how talented Neville really was. Harry wondered from time to time what his friend had told her about their adventures over the last five years.

Neville protested, "It wasn't that good."

"It was. He might have had something to say, but that's just Snape." Harry chuckled.

"I don't understand you two. He's always so mean in class. Then when you talk about him, he's a different person." Neville said finishing his tea.

"He was the first person to tell me I was a wizard. He's looked out for me every day since my eleventh birthday." Harry shrugged, "I guess I can take a few rough words here and there for that."

Neville shook his head. He would never understand them. He had accepted that truth during their first year at Hogwarts.
"Good morning," Mrs. Longbottom greeted the pair.

"Morning Gran," "Good morning, Mrs. Longbottom." They replied together.

"Are you prepared for your exams this morning?" She asked.

Harry nodded. "We've got the Charms written this morning."

"Charms is a soft option, Neville. Transfiguration is a much better line of magic." Mrs. Longbottom advised.

"Yes Gran," Neville agreed.

"What is this afternoon?" She asked.

"Practical Divination," Neville replied.

Mrs. Longbottom made a noise of disapproval. "Are we ready to leave?"

"Yes ma'am," Harry said slipping his wand into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Your wand safety is horrible Potter," Mrs. Longbottom chastised.

Harry snickered. Moody had lectured him for the same thing the previous summer at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Mad-Eye Moody told me I'd hex a buttock off doing it," Harry informed her.

"Alastor is smarter than he looks," Mrs. Longbottom agreed.

"Your trousers don't have a wand sheath?" Neville asked.

"They're Muggle, so no. Your trousers have a special place to put your wand?" Harry asked. How had he never noticed that about wizard clothes all these years?

Neville stood displaying the small loop that lay just under the belt line.

"Is this the last of your exams?" Mrs. Longbottom drew them back on topic.

Harry nodded, "Finally free, just in time for our birthdays."

The two boys were to celebrate their sixteenth birthdays together as they were born a day apart. Mrs. Longbottom had invited a number of her old friends, many of whom wanted to meet The-Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was allowed to invite his friends. Remus and the Weasley were supposed to attend, as was Luna. Hermione and Viktor were coming too. Hermione would be staying for a week at the Longbottom house.

The three Flooed to the Ministry of Magic. What Mrs. Longbottom did for the morning he did not know. She was there when they finished and was curious to hear how the boys thought they did. Harry didn't tell her how he remembered the charm to make things fly was "Wingardium Leviosa" that Neville used it in first year to knock out a full grown mountain troll with its own club. Nor did he tell her about the Summoning Charm used to get past a dragon.

After a spot of lunch, the boys had their final exam. Neither felt particularly confident exiting the exam. Harry would not be sad to say goodbye to the subject of Divination. The topic had already played a big enough role in his life so far.
The boys were rushed upstairs to change for dinner as soon as they got back to the house. The first of the guests (mostly Neville's family) would be arriving that evening for dinner. Harry had never met any of those coming, but he had heard tale of most. Harry wasn't sure where he fit into this gathering.

At the Dursleys, he always hid in his room. Although, on that last trip Aunt Marge wanted to keep an eye on him and insisted he stay close by. That hadn't worked out so well for either of them. Worse for Aunt Marge, Harry got to spend the rest of the holiday at Professor Snape's house. That was probably the best summer Harry ever had. The Longbottoms were nothing like the Dursleys. They wouldn't expect him to hide away unseen, pretending he didn't exist, of that Harry was certain. As long they didn't say anything too out of line, there wouldn't be a repeat of the Aunt Marge situation either.

Harry came back downstairs twenty minutes later dressed in a button up and trousers. It wasn't as nice as Mrs. Longbottom may have hoped for but it was nicer than the faded, too short jeans he had been wearing. He would have to get some new clothes when they went to Diagon Alley. He didn't think the Pure Blood witch would want to veer into Muggle London. Maybe he could get an Order member to take him. Tonks was half-Muggle Born and there was no way she got all of those band shirts in Diagon Alley. He would have to ask her tomorrow at the party.

"There you are," Mrs. Longbottom said spotting Harry on the stairs. "Come meet my brother Alghee."

Harry was introduced to Mrs. Longbottom's brother and his wife Enid. After that a few more family members he didn't remember the name of now. One name that did stick was Bathilda Bagshot, the author of, "A History of Magic" the text he had used in Professor Binns' class for the last five years. The old witch seemed to perk up his name. She started to ramble on about his parents, Dumbledore, and Godric's Hollow. Harry didn't get a chance to ask her what she meant by all that before Alghee took her away to calm down.

Harry was pulled into more conversations with people he didn't know talking about things he didn't understand. It wasn't until he got a chance to ask someone about Bathilda. Enid suggested he forget about it. The witch had once been one of the greatest historians of her time. Recently though, she had lost her spark. No one could blame her, not at her age. Augusta, Mrs. Longbottom, always invited her since they had been friends for so long since Augusta was a young woman. Though she was always invited, they thought this might have been the first time the witch left her Godric's Hollow home in several years, possibly a decade.

Harry started looking for an escape after about an hour. He was tired from the exams. He wanted to be rested for the party tomorrow.

"I know that look. James used to get it whenever he got caught up in a conversation with the Minister of Magic," Remus teased.

"Remus," said excitedly hugging the werewolf.

"A happy birthday Harry," Remus said, a worn smile on his features. "You didn't think I would miss your party, did you?"

"You said you were going on an assignment for Dumbledore," Harry protested.

Remus sighed, "Yes, I am. I am taking a few days away to talk to the headmaster, see you."

"Is anyone going to think that's funny? Suspicious, I mean." Harry asked concernedly.
"No," Remus reassured. "Members will be gone for days or weeks at a time."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, "Good. What are you doing?"

"I can't tell you very much. Mostly I am trying to gain the trust of some of my fellow werewolves." Remus explained, at Harry's confused expression he continued. "Many of the others do not trust me as I show the signs of having tried to blend into regular wizarding society."

"They don't like that? What else were you supposed to do?" Harry asked.

"There is a leader, a werewolf by the name of Greyback that thinks werewolves should reject society and make our own. Why should we blend in with those that rejected us?" Remus answered.

"People want to do that?"

Remus nodded slowly, "A few. It is hard to argue with some of his points. Many of my fellow wolves were driven out of their homes when their condition was discovered, some even as children. They were forced to make their own way. They never had a chance have a childhood, to attend Hogwarts, to have people who cared for them, did not shun them for their condition."

"That's awful," Harry said sadly.

"It is," Remus agreed. "What is worse, is that many of those following Greyback do not realize how much of a monster he truly is. Greyback is the werewolf that bit me when I was a small child. He attacked me because my father said something that upset him. I was not the only child he turned into a wolf either. Children are a bit of a specialty of his. He purposely stations himself near where there are children with the goal of attacking as many as possible."

Harry sat there dumbstruck. He had heard of very few things more evil than this particular werewolf.

Remus forced a smile on his face, "That is enough sad news about me. Tell me how your OWLs went."

Harry groaned. He spent the next hour discussing Harry's exams in detail. Harry felt fairly confident on Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology. He was less certain about Potions, it was one of his weaker subjects, even with how much time he spent chopping and slicing things for Professor Snape. Remus laughed, apparently Lily had said something almost identical in their fifth year. She had gone on to receive an "O" one of only two that year, Snape being the second. Remus remembered his own time sitting for the tests. He had been the only one of the Marauders to take then seriously as James and Sirius were naturally gifted at taking tests.

Harry excused himself after that as he fought falling asleep on the couch. He would see Remus again in the morning before he had his meeting with the headmaster. Unfortunately, he would be unable to attend the actual party.

Harry remembered his idea about Tonks taking him into Muggle London before the school started as they were saying goodnight. The werewolf shifted uncomfortably at the mention of the witch. Harry wondered what was wrong, the two had seemed to get on rather well at headquarters.

When Harry arrived downstairs the next morning there were already half a dozen people at the table. Luckily, most were tucked away behind various newspapers or journals. Harry wasn't awake enough for small talk. He ate his breakfast quickly hoping to avoid the talk so he could be ready when the first guests arrived. Most weren't supposed to becoming until at least lunch, but Harry did want a lot of people staring at his scar.
The chiming that filled the room let him know the first person had come through the fireplace. Harry rushed out leaving his breakfast half eaten.

"Hermione," Harry said pulling her into a hug.

"Harry, Happy Birthday! It's so good to see you!" Hermione said hugging him tightly.

"You too." He released her.

"Wow," Hermione said looking around the rather grand room.

"I know," Harry mumbled. "I never imagined Neville living like this. Malfoy is always going on about his house is. I can only imagine what it's like if it's bigger than this."

"Harry, the Malfoys live in a proper manner. This would be tiny for him." Hermione explained.

Harry shrugged.

Hermione stepped closer to one of the large portraits on the wall. "I agree, I always imagined Neville in a sort of row house or something. He never really talked about it."

The subject of the portrait looked like he wanted to say something about it but never got the chance, as Remus entered the room, pulling Harry and Hermione away. The trio was joined by Neville a short time later. The four spent much of the remainder of the morning hiding in the library so Mrs. Longbottom could finish the party decorations.

Hermione told them about her week long visit with Viktor was in the country for the next several weeks for matches with his club team. She was still waiting for her results for her OWLs. It was starting to feel like she was never going to receive them. All three of them reassured her she did fine. There was no doubt in their minds the witch would be able to pursue any topic she desired to the NEWT level.

"I am sorry, I will have to say goodbye for now," Remus apologized as the clock on the mantle struck eleven.

"Do you have to go?" Harry pleaded.

"Yes, the Headmaster is waiting for me," Remus apologized.

"Neville, a very happy birthday," Remus said turning to the older boy.

"Thank you, Remus," Neville standing to shake the man's hand.

"Hermione."

"Bye Remus," she said giving the man a hug.

Remus stuck his hands in the pockets of a worn denim jacket.

"Harry, care to walk me out?"

Harry followed him out in silence.

"I would have felt bad doing this in front of Neville," Remus said softly. "I wasn't able to do much in terms of present shopping. I found this in Sirius' things when we were leaving headquarters. He meant to give it to you, that I know. I am not sure if he failed to put it in with the rest of your
Christmas presents, when you returned to school after the holidays, or now."

Harry took the small brown paper-wrapped parcel. "Should I open it now?"

"Go ahead," Remus encouraged, "I don't know what it is either."

Harry pulled away from the flap of Spell-o-tape. He exposed the reflexive surface of a small mirror. There was a note too, but he didn't need it with Remus standing there with him.

"I remember these. They allow you to communicate with the person holding its partner. James and Sirius used to use them to talk when in separate parts of the castle. That normally meant they were in different detentions." Remus elaborated.

Harry smiled sadly at the bit of glass. "Where's the other half?"

"I don't know. I hope Sirius didn't have it with him when he left for Azkaban that night..." Remus stopped. "I'm sorry, Harry. I miss him as well. I will see if I can find the match at headquarters."

"You're going back to Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked. As far as he knew, no one had been there since they left in January.

"Dumbledore wants to make sure all the Order things are probably secured in case Death Eaters do try and break in at some point," Remus explained.

Harry nodded slowly. "I told him he could go back to using as headquarters if he wanted when he came and told me about Sirius' will."

"I know," Remus said softly. "He also told me you wanted me to have Sirius' gold."

"I don't need it," Harry said with a shrug. "I have more than enough already."

"And you've had to provide for yourself more than any normal child should. It's yours. I really do need to go. I'll let you know if I find it," Remus promised.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled. "At least you won't have to see Kreacher this time. He's in the kitchens at Hogwarts."

The werewolf wished him happy birthday once more before stepping in the hearth and calling for Hogwarts. The guests began to arrive in earnest at the strike of noon. The Weasleys were the first, all of those currently living in Britain. That meant Harry got to see Bill for the first time since the Quidditch World Cup. He had also brought along his fiancee, Fleur Delacour. The pair planned to many the next summer. Harry was happy for them.

A young woman came through the fireplace, it wasn't until Harry received a morose, "Wotcher" that Harry realized it was Tonks. He had never seen the witch in such a state of appearance.

"Hi, Tonks. How are you?" Harry asked.

"Fine," but her tone betrayed her.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"It's nothing, just a lot of long hours. Lots of days doing double shifts after those attacks on Muggles." She said pushing a clump of limp brown hair from her eyes.

"Sorry to hear that," Harry sympathized.
The Auror shrugged.

"Nymphadora, I thought I heard your voice," Mrs. Longbottom greeted.

Harry didn't miss Tonks' cringe at her given name. "Hi Mrs. L," she replied.

"I am so glad to have you with us. I must say I rather approve of this new look, none of those horrid neon colors." The elderly witch observed as she walked with Tonks to the back garden where the rest of the guests were gathered. Harry followed little ways behind.

The garden was filled with Neville's relatives, classmates, and a few members of the Order of the Phoenix. It took Harry a while to get back to Tonks. People kept wanting to say hello and wish him a happy birthday.

"Tonks, do you think you could take me shopping in Muggle London before the start of term?" Harry finally asked.

"I don't think I'll have the time Harry," Tonks said over lunch.

"Could another order member maybe?" He suggested.

"We're all very busy Harry," came Tonks' terse response.

"I understand," Harry sighed.

The party wound down with presents and cake. Harry's gifts were a mixture of Muggle and wizarding. Neville's were all wizarding, many dealing with his best and favorite subject, Herbology. As much as he liked the party he was glad when all the guests were gone and it was only he, the two Longbottoms, and Hermione.

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"Good evening sir," Harry greeted the headmaster. His eyes lingered on the long black fingers of his right hand.

Dumbledore pulled his sleeve down to cover the damaged fingers. "Thank you for agreeing to accompany me on this errand. I'm afraid it would not be very successful without your assistance."

"It's no problem sir," Harry moving his eyes away from the now covered hand. "Sir, what happened to your hand?"

"It's a tale for another day, my boy. We will Apparate to our destination. I believe you have done it before." Dumbledore inquired.

"Yes," Harry agreed, less than thrilled. He did not enjoy the sensation of being squeezed through a straw.

"Very good, if you will take my arm, above the elbow if you please," Dumbledore said offering the damaged limb.

"Shouldn't I tell Mrs. Longbottom we're leaving?" Harry asked.

"Augusta is aware of the plans. We will be back in a matter of hours," Dumbledore reassured.
Harry nodded and took hold of the old man's upper arm. The stuffy sitting room was replaced by the cool night air. Harry thought he could smell the sea. It was helping to ease his upset stomach. He braced his hands on his knees in case he was sick. He wished he had one of Professor Snape's Calming Draughts.

"Where are we?" He asked.

"Cornwall, we are here to see an old colleague," Dumbledore explained. The man took off down a narrow lane. "This way, my boy."

Harry jogged to keep up with the ancient wizard. The man was surprisingly quick for his age.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked.

"The house, my boy."

"Why didn't we just Apparate directly there?" Harry asked.

"There are most likely a number of wards around the house. Even if there were not, it is considered very rude to Apparate directly into another wizard's property without their express permission," Dumbledore explained.

"Right," Harry agreed.

The two turned down the street. The headmaster stopped outside of the third house on the left. The door was off the hinges. One of the windows was broken.

"Oh no," Harry breathed taking in the site.

Dumbledore proceeded into the house keen to see the extent of the damage. Harry followed the man as he promised he would. The interior of the house was in an even worse state, chairs, tables, and lamps were smashed. Blood covered the far wall.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry mumbled. "Do you think Kingsley will be able to find who did this?"

"No, I don't think we'll need him. The perpetrator is still here." Dumbledore tutted.

"Really?" Asked Harry looking around the destroyed surroundings.

Dumbledore nodded, poking a puffy armchair sharply with the end of his wand.

"Ow," the chair complained.

"Hello Horace," Dumbledore greeted the chair, now wizard standing in front of him.

"How did you know it was me?" Horace asked. The man was short, nearly as wide as he was tall. He had little hair on the top his head, only a few on the sides. He made up for this an impressive walrus mustache.

"A rather good job, but you forgot the Dark Mark," Dumbledore answered.

"Damn, I knew I was forgetting something. Not bad for only a two-minute warning," Horace said proudly.

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore.
"The answer is no," Horace complained rubbing his stomach, obviously still sore from Dumbledore's jab.

"Horace, I've come all this way. Should you not at least hear me out?" Dumbledore asked.

"Fine," Horace agreed sitting in the most comfortable looking of the chairs.

Dumbledore motioned for Harry to sit. He complied joining Dumbledore on the settee.

"I would like you to come back to your old position. You need not take one the duty of Head of House as it is currently filled." Dumbledore requested.

"I'm too old for this nonsense, Albus," Horace complained.

"You're younger than me. The safety of Hogwarts is far more comfortable than being on the run. How many times do you move a month? Three?" Dumbledore asked.

"At least," Horace agreed. "I won't have anything to do with any of that Order balderdash."

"I wouldn't dream to ask you," Dumbledore reassured. "Now, if I may, may I use your loo?"

"Second door on the left," Horace said motioning down the hall.

Dumbledore excused himself. Harry sat awkwardly looking around the room.

"Who are you?" Horace asked.

"Harry," the boy said, his eyes returning to the man, "Harry Potter."

Horace's eyes took on a predatory twinkle. Harry felt rather like a zebra in the eye of a hungry lion.

"Of course, you look just like your father," Horace observed.

"Except my eyes, yeah, I know," Harry agreed. "I've got my mum's eyes."

"Lily was one of my favorite students of all of all time," Horace stated. "I know as a professor we're not supposed to say that sort of thing. I had a little club, those who were destined to become something great. For example, Hestia Jones, captain of the Holyhead Harpies, she used to get me free tickets whenever I liked. The editor of the Daily Prophet, still owls me on occasion. I don't know if you knew Sirius Black, he was a friend of your father at school. He has killed a few months ago. He never had much interest, oh how I wished he had. Perhaps it was for the best, all that time Azkaban, wasting away. Still, I would have liked the set."

Harry bit his tongue fighting back the words that threatened to spill out uncontrolled. Of course, Sirius wanted nothing to do with this self-congratulating ass.

Horace did not notice Harry's distress as he continued talking, "I only managed to get Regulus of the Blacks. Yes, Lily was a member of my little club, the Slug Club."

"You're Professor Slughorn?" Harry demanded, his grief temporarily displaced with astonishment. This wasn't at all who he expected from the stories.

"Am I still know at the school after all this time? That's an impressive feat if I do say so myself." Slughorn said pompously.

"Errr..." Harry hesitated. He wasn't too sure how he felt about this man. He wasn't sure how he would respond to the truth. He chose to favor the truth. "Not really. I've heard your name a few times
in stories about my mum and dad's time at Hogwarts."

"Stories hmmm...." Slughorn hummed, "and who was telling them? You must be careful on who you let tell your history."

"Friends of my mum and dad, mostly Professor Snape," Harry admitted.

"Severus Snape," Slughorn scoffed. "He was such a disappointment. Then again, what can you expect from a half-blood like that?"

Disgusted, Harry spat, "What's that supposed to mean? Blood status doesn't matter. My best friend is Muggle-born and she's the best in our year, the whole school even."

"What's he done with his talent, became a professor. Severus had such great potential, it was thrown away getting caught up in all that nonsense to which he could never truly belong. And for what?"

"My apologies," Dumbledore said re-entering the room. "Oh, I do enjoy Muggle knitting patterns. Have you come to a decision, Horace?"

"I'll bloody do it, but I have conditions," Slughorn confirmed.

"Only naturally," Dumbledore agreed.

"I want twice the salary of my last year, no patrolling the corridors at night," Harry lost track of the demands after that as Slughorn ticked them off on his short sausage like fingers. Dumbledore seemed to agree at least to most of them, as he ended the conversation with, "Then we will see you on September first. Would you like some help putting this place back together before I return Harry to his guardian?"

Slughorn nodded, "May as well."

"What blood did you use?" Dumbledore asked as he moved to collected blood into a new materialized flask.

"Dragon," Slughorn said righting the destroyed piano.

"I thought as much given the viscosity," Dumbledore observed.

"It was my last vail too. It's going for six galleons a pint now," Slughorn complained looking at the newly recollected blood. "Damn, too dusty to use again."

The room was back to perfect condition in moments. Harry was amazed at how little effort it took for such talented wizards to fix such a mess.

Harry and the headmaster said goodbye a few moments later. "What did you think of Professor Slughorn, Harry?" Dumbledore asked as they walked back to their original Apparition point.

Harry shrugged, "He makes Lockhart look modest going on about all those people he knows." Dumbledore chuckled heartily at the comparison. "Is he like You-Know-Who and believes that everybody should be Purebloods?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore shook his head, "No, Horace is not prejudiced in such a manner, He is more concerned with how those around him may be of service to him. He collects these threads like a spider weaving a web. Harry, I am going to ask you something that you might not enjoy."
"I'll do anything," Harry confirmed.

"My dear boy, I'm sorry. I must ask you to let Slughorn collect you. He has some knowledge that will be key to our victory." Dumbledore explained.

"Oh," Harry mumbled, surprised, "whatever you need."

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said, almost relieved.

"Sir," Harry asked. "If I remember right, Sirius said Professor Slughorn was the Potions professor. If Slughorn is coming back to his old job, where is Professor Snape going? Is he on a mission like Remus or Hagrid?"

"No, Harry, he's not on a mission," Dumbledore told him.

"Then why do we need a new Potions Master? Wait...." Harry paused, "he's going to teach Defense?" He didn't wait for the headmaster to confirm it, he knew he was right. "He's going to love that. It'll be nice to have a competent teacher in the topic again."

"Snape's teaching Defense?" Neville moaned.

"Yeah, sorry Neville," Harry told him and Hermione about his meeting the previous evening.

"I wonder why he chose to let him have the position this year," Hermione said thoughtfully. "He's never let him before."

"Maybe he ran out of teachers. Hagrid said he was having problems years back, remember? That's how we ended up with Lockhart." Harry pointed out.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "but still..."

"You can't think the position is cursed, Hermione, not you," Neville said in disbelief.

"I never said I did," Hermione confirmed. "However, you must admit the trend is rather disturbing. I asked Professor McGonagall about it once. She can't remember the last time they had a Defense professor last more than a year. You have to go back to when she first started teaching almost fifty years ago. I looked it up in the library."

"Of course you did," Harry mumbled. "What you think Snape is going to leave at the end of the year?" Harry shook his head,

"No, he wouldn't. It's too much like his home."

"Are you sure that's not just your feelings, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione, trust me. Snape would never voluntarily leave the school." Harry insists.

"He never seemed to like teaching much," Neville countered.
Harry shrugged, "I just know okay. Snape would only leave if Dumbledore told him to."

"Harry," Hermione whined.

"It doesn't matter, let's just see what the year brings," Harry said, effectively killing the topic. "When did your gran say we were going to Diagon Alley?" Harry asked.

"We can't go until we have our OWL results. We have to know our marks are good enough for the topics we want," Neville replied.

"I got my results last week," Hermione informed them.

"All "O's" of course," Harry surmised.

"No," Hermione said clearly disappointed.

"What!" The boys shouted together. They had never known their friend not to get top marks.

"What subject didn't you get an "O" in?" Neville managed to ask, his shock subsiding.

"Defense," Hermione admitted, softly.

"Really," Harry asked surprised.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed, "I think I could have done better with my explanation of the differences between werewolves and true wolves. I spent too much time on the identifications."

"It's still really good, Hermione," Neville reassured. "I don't think I'll have gotten an "O" on anything."

"Other than Herbology you mean," Harry corrected. "You're the best one in the year in that. Professor Sprout's practically made you her apprentice."

Neville's face turned very pink at the compliment. "Thanks, Harry."

"Only telling the truth," Harry said with a grin. "Do you think your gran will let us stop by Fred and George's shop when we go?"

"I hope so," Neville agreed.

Hermione shook her head in disapproval. "Tell me you don't want any of damn Skiving Snack Boxes."

"No," Neville confirmed, "it's just Ginny is helping them a few nights a week." His blush now crept even higher up his face, all the way to the top of his head.

"Really?" Harry asked. "I thought Mrs. Weasley wouldn't let Ginny or Ron out of her sight with all that's going on."

"She's not," Neville clarified. "She goes with Ron and Ginny, Percy sometimes too. She makes sure they all have a proper meal and their apartment isn't a total disaster."

Harry chuckled, "That sounds more like Mrs. Weasley." All of them laughed themselves breathless.

"Harry," Hermione asked settling back into the sofa.
"What?" Harry asked rubbing his sore ribs. It had been a long time since he'd had a laugh like that, before Sirius and Mr. Weasley died probably.

"What do you want to do after we leave Hogwarts?"

Harry tensed he hadn't told them about what Professor Dumbledore had told them about the prophecy. He didn't want them to worry. They didn't need to know that he would have to become a killer, not right now.

"Harry? Are you okay?" Neville frowned at him. Harry shook his head, "I'm fine. I promise." He added with the unchanged looks of concern he was still receiving. "Didn't I tell you about my career advising session with McGonagall and Umbridge?"

"No," the two others said together.

"Why was Umbridge there?" Neville asked.

"She wasn't at yours?" He received matching shaking heads. Harry shrugged, "Maybe it was part of being High Inquisitor, or her observations of Professor McGonagall. I told McGonagall I wanted to be an Auror. Umbridge said that it would never happen as long as Fudge was Minister. McGonagall said she would make sure I became an Auror if it was the last thing she ever did."

"That was nice of her," Neville said.

Harry nodded.

"Is that what you really want to do?" Hermione asked. There was a note of doubt in her voice. She could tell there was something that Harry wasn't telling him. He hoped she wouldn't push him, not right now.

Harry shrugged, "I think so. I don't know what else I could do."

That wasn't good enough for his friend as she said. "There are so many things you're good at, Harry. You're the youngest Seeker in a century. You have excellent marks in Potions, Herbology, Charms, Transfiguration. You shouldn't just settle for what you think people expect of you."

"I'm not settling, Hermione." Harry insisted, "I don't even know if I'll make it through the war. Maybe I should worry about it then."

"You're not leaving school?" Hermione demanded. From the outrage in her voice, you'd think he destroyed a brand new Firebolt or something.

"Of course not," Harry dismissed. "It's just... it's sort of hard to think about the future with everything going on."

"I understand," Neville agreed.

"What do you want to do after Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"I'd love to teach Herbology some day," Neville said a blush creeping up his neck.

"You'd be wonderful," Hermione said, leaning forward to pat Neville's knee.

"You think?"

"Of course," Hermione reassured.
"What do you want to do Hermione?" Neville asked.

"I'd like to do something worthwhile." Hermione paused, "Maybe I could take ELF further. I could join the Ministry and make them see how we treat creatures is wrong. We shouldn't treat them like dirt just because we believe our species is superior."

"That's a great goal," Harry agreed.

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Harry."

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Harry was starting to get worried. It was a week before the start of term and they still didn't have their OWL results. Mrs. Longbottom didn't want to have to make two trips to Diagon Alley this summer so she refused to go until they knew what subjects the boys might be able to pursue to NEWT level.

"Didn't Dumbledore tell you something about it when you went to talk to Slughorn?" Neville asked over his morning tea.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't think to ask."

A house elf, Harry didn't know its name held a silver tray. Two parchment envelopes sat in the center, one addressed to Neville, the other to Harry.

"That's them?" Neville asked.

Harry nodded. Neither boy moved to take their mail.

"What's this," Mrs. Longbottom asked bustling into the room.

"Our OWLs came, Gran," Neville explained.

"Then open them you silly boys," she encouraged.

Neville took his first, picking it up with shaking fingers. Harry followed suit, nearly dropping it on the floor. Harry stared at the purple wax seal, the course of his future lay inside.

"That's dramatic enough," Hermione said grabbing the letter from Harry's hand. She opened it with her breakfast knife and glanced over them quickly.

"About what you expected," she said handing them back.

Harry looked down the list.

Astronomy: E
Care of Magical Creatures: E
Charms: E
Defense Against the Dark Arts: O
It was over before it began, he wouldn't be able to become an Auror after all. He hadn't gotten high enough marks in Potions.

"What's wrong?" Neville asked looking up from his own results.

"I can't take Potions. You need an "O". I only managed an "E"," Harry explained.

"Are you sure?" Neville asked.

"That's what McGonagall told me last term during career advice," Harry replied.

"Maybe the new teacher will have different standards," Hermione offered.

Harry shrugged. "Maybe I'll just try and play Quidditch."

"Harry," Hermione sighed.

"Hermione's right, maybe Slughorn will take NEWT students with an "E". Didn't you say he only came back because of you? I'm sure he would make an exception for you to teach Harry Potter." Neville argued.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled casting another disappointed look down the short line of letters. "How did you do Neville?"

"Okay," he said with a small shrug, offering the paper to Harry. Harry handed his over in return.

Neville got the expected "O" in Herbology. He also got E's in Charms, Defense, Care of Magical Creatures. He got an Acceptable in Potions, Transfiguration, and Astronomy (much to Harry's surprise). What didn't surprise Harry was Neville's failure to pass History of Magic or Divination.

"I'll talk to Dumbledore about coordinating an escort service for you to go to Diagon Alley. If you two boys did not require new robes I would send for everything owl order." Mrs. Longbottom informed them.

"Mrs. Longbottom, do you think you could ask him about me making a trip to the Muggle world as well?" Harry asked.

"I will see what can be arranged," she replied.

"What do you want in Muggle London?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing special, just normal clothes, everything I have is too short or tight," said Harry.

"No wonder, you've grown about a foot," Hermione said with a laugh. "Neville's gran's idea isn't a bad one if Dumbledore says no."

"Owl orders? Muggles don't use owls for post," Neville said clearly confused.
"They don't," Hermione confirmed, "but they use the regular post. You could always have things sent to my parents and have them send it on."

Harry considered, "If Dumbledore says no."

It turned out they would need Hermione's parents to mail on Harry's catalog selected wardrobe. The Order was stretched thin and the headmaster did not trust the Ministry despite a new Minister of Magic being named. The new head of the wizard government was a former Auror named Rufus Scrimgeour. The pictures of him in the Daily Prophet reminded Harry of a lion. The headmaster was only able to arrange an escort to Diagon Alley two days before they were due to board the train back to Hogwarts. Harry was relieved that the escort didn't turn out to be a team of half a dozen Aurors. Instead, it was Hagrid and Bill Weasley. He was with his mother and youngest siblings who also needed their Hogwarts supplies. Harry, Neville, and Hermione went with Hagrid to get new robes while the Weasleys went to the bookstore. There they ran into Draco Malfoy and his mother. Harry noticed something strange about Draco's behavior. The boy had pulled away from his arm when Madame Malkin tried to shorten the sleeve, that would have exposed the inside of his wrist.

Later, when they went to the twins' store Harry saw Draco again, this time without his mother. The boy slipped down the entrance to Knockturn Alley. The trio slipped under the Invisibility Cloak and followed Draco. They found him in Borgen and Burkes. Harry slipped out a set of Extendable Ears under the door. They could hear Malfoy threatening the shopkeeper, showing him something on his arm and mentioning Grayback coming to check on him. Hermione's attempt to find out what Malfoy was trying to buy failed miserably.

Harry was convinced Malfoy had taken the Dark Mark. That was why he didn't want Madame Malkin to see his wrist and what he showed to Borgen. Neville and Hermione had a hard time believing Harry's theory. Why would Voldemort mark Draco, an underaged wizard?

On September first Harry and Neville were escorted to the train at King's Cross by Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt. There seemed to be fewer families on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Harry loaded his trunk into a compartment with Neville. Luna found them a short time later adding her trunks to the boys'. Just after the train pulled away from the station Colin Creevey delivered a tied scroll to Harry's compartment. Slughorn had invited him to lunch. Harry wasn't sure what to expect, but Neville and Luna encouraged him to go. The lunch was a bunch of people who were related to successful witches or wizards. When one boy mentioned he didn't know his famous uncle, Slughorn ignored him the rest of lunch. What Harry found interesting was Draco wasn't invited.

Instead of heading back to his compartment after lunch Harry under his Invisibility Cloak followed the only Slytherin, Blaise Zabini to his compartment. Harry managed to sneak into the luggage rack and listen to the conversations of those in there. Malfoy didn't seem that insulted not being included. He didn't care about a professor, it didn't sound like he was certain he would finish the school year.

The problem really came when the train arrived in Hogsmeade. Harry couldn't get away. Draco waited until the others left before putting Harry in complete Body-Bind, kicked him in the face when
he fell from the luggage compartment. The Slytherin left Harry lying on the floor of the train, bleeding. Harry was lucky that Tonks found him on the floor before the train returns to London.

The Auror walked Harry to the gates of the castle in a heavy silence. She had to send a Patronus to summon a professor to come and get Harry. It was not Hagrid that she asked for, but Professor Snape that came down to the gates to meet them.
"The new Patronus looks weak," Snape said snidely. Shutting the gates in the young woman's face before turning on his heel and walking back toward the castle.

Harry fell silently in step with the surly Potions Master.

"Ten points for being out of uniform, another ten for tardiness, and a week's detention," Snape said as they walked.

"Yes sir," Harry mumbled.

"Would you care to explain your delayed arrival?" Snape asked. Harry shrugged.

"I will have none of that Potter. Use your words." Snape rebuked.

"Draco, he's up to something." Harry managed.

"Damn it, Harry! Why must you always insist on inserting yourself into everything?" Snape snapped.

"He's planning something. He has the Dark Mark!" Harry insisted.

"What Malfoy is doing is none of your concern, Potter," Snape replied. "You need to think your actions through for once. Today it was a broken nose. Tomorrow it could be your life!"

"He's working for Voldemort!" Harry all but yelled.

"Don't say that name!" Snape yelled. "The name is Tabooed. If you were to say that name anywhere but Hogwarts the Dark Lord and his followers would be here in an instant."

Harry did not know how to respond to that. The two walked in silence the rest of the way to the castle. They arrived in time to hear the deafening silence that was the rest of the school's reaction that Snape would not be Potions Master, but Defense the Dark Arts instructor.

“It’s definitely a sign of how this year is going to go,” Harry muttered to himself.
"I can't believe Dumbledore gave that slimy git Defense Against the Dark Arts," Ron complained over breakfast the next morning.

"I donna know," said Seamus, "maybe we're lucky. It'll be his last year."

"Pardon," Hermione inquired as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

"We've never had a DADA professor last more than a year," Seamus pointed out.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "but maybe he will just go back to teaching Potions."

"Personally, I'm hoping for another death," Ron said around a mouthful of sausage.

"That's a horrible thing to say, Ronald." Hermione chastised. "Especially coming from someone who just lost their father."

"You think Snape has a family?" Dean joked.

"Of course he does," Hermione replied.

"He had parents at one point. That doesn't mean he had a family." Harry corrected.

Hermione frowned at him.

Harry sighed, "I had a mum and a dad, but they died. The Dursleys were never really my family." He wasn't sure that his friend understood what he was saying.

"Ms. Granger," Professor McGonagall called, drawing the attention the first of the sixth years for their schedule consultation.

"How many NEWTs do yeh think she'll go fer?" Seamus asked.

"As many as McGonagall will let her," Harry said, relieved for the change in topic.

Hermione's schedule was approved in an instant. She collected her bag and made her way out of the Great Hall for her class. Neville's schedule took a bit longer to complete.

"I'm sorry Longbottom, an "A" simply won't do in Transfiguration. I'm afraid you won't be able to keep up." McGonagall said looking down Neville's schedule request. "Why not go for a NEWT in Charms? You had an "E" in that?"

"Gran says Charms is a 'soft option'," Neville said softly.

"Just because Augusta failed her Charms OWL does not mean the subject is without its merits. You would think she would appreciate you for the young man you are, not what she imagined. After all this time you would think after all you've done these last five years that would be enough. Look at what you did at the Ministry this spring." The professor ignored the blush that was creeping up Neville’s face and neck. McGonagall had never said anything remotely as nice to him as this in all his time at Hogwarts. "Take Charms, I will explain it to Augusta. She should be proud of you, Longbottom."

"Thank you," Neville mumbled as he turned a deeper red.
McGonagall tapped her wand on Neville's now completed schedule before handing it back.

"Did you hear what she said?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head.

"My gran should be proud of us for what we did at the Ministry. She should accept me as I am. An' just because Gran failed her Charms OWL doesn't," Neville screwed up his face in concentration to recall McGonagall's exact words, "the subject is not without its merits."

Harry chuckled. "Of course your gran should be proud of you Neville. You helped fight off half a dozen Death Eaters. They could have gotten the prophecy or escaped the Ministry if it weren't for you."

Neville's blush was renewed in response to his friend's kind words.

"Potter," McGonagall called.

Harry walked up to his head of house, his selected courses already marked. McGonagall wordlessly took the offered piece of parchment.

McGonagall ran a finger down the names muttering as she went, "Charms fine, Herbology, fine, I was happy to see your marks in Transfiguration, Potter. I would have expected nothing less in Defense. I don't see Potions on your schedule. Have you changed your mind about becoming an Auror? I know the loss of Black...."

"What? No. No. " Harry stammered, "It's just you said you needed an "O" in Potions to continue to NEWTs."

"And you did when Professor Snape was teaching Potions. Professor Slughorn is more than glad to take an "E" level student into his NEWT class." McGonagall explained. "I am certain he would be incredibly disappointed were you not to continue the subject."

Harry nodded in understanding. McGonagall flicked her wand at his new schedule.

"Hurry and you won't be late for your first class," McGonagall said as a way of dismissal.

"Yes ma'am," Harry agreed.

Around a dozen students stood in the hall waiting to be let into the classroom. It was the first time at school Harry had ever seen Malfoy independent of his bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle. The boy's pale blonde hair was drawn back away from his face, accentuating his sharp features. Harry noticed the deep bags under the boy's stormy grey eyes. Harry wondered if that was normal for the teen, or if it was a recent development. In the six years, they had gone to school together, Harry had never thought to notice that about his classmate.

The door to the classroom opened to reveal Professor Slughorn dressed in teaching robes over a cheery Slytherin green velvet suit. Hermione looked over to Harry very taken aback by the man's appearance.

Bubbling cauldrons were stationed throughout the room. Each was different, there was a murky brown one by Malfoy. Harry recognized it at once from his experience with it in second year; it was Polyjuice Potion. There was one that was a faint blue, perfectly calm. The one that caught Harry's attention the most was a cheerfully boiling cauldron that sat on Slughorn's desk.
"Welcome Sixth Years, this is Advanced Potion making. I am Professor Slughorn. Now for a bit of fun to start the first day back. You can see there are a number of cauldrons stationed around the room. I would like each of you to take a look at them, then we can test to see how many you can identify."

The class broke for ten minutes as the few students with one instruction, "not to ingest, or otherwise, consume any of the potions" for their own safety. Harry didn't know any of the potions other than Polyjuice. One smelled familiar like fresh cut grass, flowers, and maybe a little of stale butter beer.

Harry returned to his seat. "Do you know what they all are?"

Hermione looked affronted.

Harry chuckled, "Of course you do."

"Now," Slughorn said clapping his hands together, "who can name for me this lovely potion," he pointed to the one on Malfoy's table. Harry rose his hand, as did Hermione.

"Yes Harry," Slughorn called on the famous Gryffindor.

"That one's Polyjuice," Harry replied instantly.

"Very good, how about this one, Harry?" Slughorn asked.

"I don't know sir," Harry admitted.

"Very well, anyone else?"

Hermione's hand shot up. Slughorn called on her, "Yes, what is it?"

"Amortentia, a love potion, sir. It is unique to each individual as it supposed to smell like those things the person is attracted to. For me it smells like fresh cut grass, new parchment, spearmint toothpaste..." she left off her face growing red as she realized how much she told her classmates.

"Did you recognize it by the sheen or the spirals of steam?" Slughorn asked with a chuckle.

"Both sir," Hermione confirmed.

"Now, how about this one," the professor said point to the next one.

"The Draught of Living Death," said Hermione instantly. "A powerful sleeping potion that will render the drinker into a sleep so deep they appear to be dead."

"Very good Ms...." Slughorn applauded.

"Granger, sir," Hermione supplied with a shy smile.

"Granger... no relation to Hector Dagworth-Granger, the founder of The Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?"

Hermione frowned, "I don't think so, sir. I am... Muggle-born."

"Muggle-born, my, my. 'My best friend is the smartest in our year.' I can see what Potter sees in you Ms. Granger," Slughorn said with a chuckle.

Hermione blushed looking to Harry. The boy only shrugged.
"I am sure you will have no trouble identifying this last potion for us Miss Granger," Slughorn said motioning to the one on the professor's desk. The gold liquid bubbled cheerfully occasional drops leap off the surface like bizarre fish.

"Felix Felicis, Liquid Lucky," Hermione answered.

"Thirty points to Gryffindor," Slughorn said with a note of approval, "A funny little potion, Felix Felicis. It gives the drinker good luck for the time consumed. An overdose may cause giddiness, overly rash behavior, dangerous overconfidence. The person who brews me the best. The Draught of Living Death will win this vial of Liquid Luck," Slughorn explained holding up a tiny glass vial. He went on to explain how it would provide the winner enough for day's worth of luck.

"Err...Professor," Harry said raising his hand. "I didn't realize I would be allowed to take Potions this year. I don't have a book or supplies."

"We can do something about that until you are able to order what's needed Harry," Slughorn says with a chuckle. The old man removed a battered copy of *Advanced Potion Making* from a cupboard in the corner.

Harry looked at the book somewhat disappointed. Harry found the required page and was stunned by the contents of the page. Almost every line of instruction has some sort of edit or comment. In some places, it is hard to see the original text. Harry did his best to make out the original text. He was supposed to be cutting a bean but was having very little luck. Harry noticed the scribbled instruction to use his knife to smash the pod instead of cutting. The juices flooded out of the shriveled bean.

Hermione wondered how Harry was so successful. He explained, much to his friend's disapproval. She didn't think they should use anything but the official institutions. Harry had always done well in Potions, but Hermione always did a bit better than him. His lack patience with the topic was his biggest problem. This was the first time Harry could remember doing better than Hermione in the subject. At the end of the class, Harry came out victorious, walking away with the vial of Felix Felicis.

"Well done, Mr. Potter," Slughorn said handing over the potion. "I found this in with my teaching supplies the other night, I thought you might like it."

Harry looked at the book in Slughorn's extended hand, "Sir?"

"Your mother and I were debating the merits of this text before she went into hiding," Slughorn explained. "I have little use for it. You are Lily's son, it should be yours."

"Thanks, sir," Harry said taking the book.

Neville was waiting for them outside the Potions classroom.

"What's that Harry?"

"A book, it belonged to my mum," Harry explained. "She was talking to Slughorn about before we had to go into hiding."

"That wasn't the only thing he got during class," Hermione added. "He won a vial of Felix Felicis, a luck potion, by cheating."

"I wasn't cheating," Harry countered.

"Huh?" Neville demanded.
Harry shook his head, "I borrowed a book from Slughorn to use since I didn't think I could take Potions this year. The bloke who owned it before wrote all over the pages." When the confused look on Neville's face didn't diminish, Harry quickly clarified, "He changed the instructions. Hermione doesn't approve. She's just mad I won.

"I am not," Hermione insisted. "You have no idea whose book that might have been. Harry, it's dangerous to fiddle with potions instructions. Is there a name in the front?"

Harry removed the book from his bag once more. He flipped to the inside front cover, "Property of the Half-Blood Prince", he read aloud.

"Who's that?" Neville asked.

"No idea," Harry said at once. He didn't tell either of them that the penmanship looked familiar. He didn't know whose it was thought. He would have to look at it in more detail later.

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"Why do you reckon Dumbledore gave Snape Defense now after all these years?" Ron asked over lunch before their first lesson of the year.

"Everyone knows he's obsessed with the dark arts," Seamus reminded him.

"Yeah, but," Ron objected.

"Maybe that's why," Hermione added.

"What do you think Harry," asked Ron.

"That'll be a good excuse for Snape to hex me into next week if I make a mistake. He's been dying to do it for years in Potions." Harry said casually.

"Harry, don't be ridiculous," Hermione chided.

"I'm not. Think about Hermione, every time I messed up a potion, my fault or not, I got detention. He didn't do that to anyone else. Why wouldn't he hex me if he thought it would help with my spell work?" Harry demanded.

"Harry," Hermione said more softly.

"Just you wait," Harry told her, "just you wait and see how he treats me. He'll hex me at least once in class today."

Hermione shook her head in disagreement.

"Just wait," Harry promised.

Every new Defense professor put a new spin on their classroom. Professor Snape had decorated the walls with posters of grizzly displays of dark magic being inflicted, of vicious animal attacks, a number of dark creatures.

Snape skipped his greeting. Instead, he jumped right into it, "It is a wonder that as many of you managed to achieve sufficient scores to pursue the subject to the NEWT level. The never ending
chain of instructors, most incompetent, has created gaps in your study of the topic. We are here to address these shortcomings. The Dark Arts are not a fixed mark one can simply memorize all the materials and achieve success. You must constantly strive to learn more, do better if you wish to survive. These posters here show you what may occur if you fail properly judge your opponent."

The man seemed to take a perverse pleasure in the disgusted expressions of the girls in the class. Parvati turned distinctly green at the sight of the effects of a particularly vicious spell.

"This term we will be learning to use nonverbal spells," Snape continued. "Can anyone explain to me the merits of using a nonverbal spell?"

The man did his best to ignore Hermione's raised hand, but as it was the only one up he wasn't very successful. Reluctantly he said, "Miss Granger?"

"Nonverbal spells give the witch or wizard casting them a split second advantage over their opponent as the other with not be able to anticipate what spell is to be used." She explained with her usual precision.

"An almost direct quote from Standard Book of Spells Year Six's text, but true nevertheless," Snape confirmed. "Pair up, practice Disarming and Shield Charms."

The class broke into pairs. Harry was left without a partner as Hermione took on Neville.

"Potter, why are you just standing there?" Snape demanded.

"I don't have a partner, sir," Harry replied.

Snape raised his wand, Harry followed suit.

"Defend yourself," Snape warned.

Harry flinched as a Stinging Hex struck his arm. He rubbed the sore limb. The man told them to practice their Disarmament Spells and Shield Charms. He never mentioned anything about jinxes. Harry couldn't say he was surprised. The professor never treated him like any of the other students. Harry failed a potion he got detention, Neville melted three cauldrons barely lost house points.

Harry tried to make his Shield Charm work without speaking. He knew the spell he could make it work verbally.

"Just like the Black," Snape goaded.

Harry puffed up his chest at the memory of his godfather. Snape was trying to get to him. Harry knew it.

"He too was too rash, too careless to master this skill," Snape continued. "If he had thought through his actions perhaps he would be here today."

"The mutt never should have gone to Azkaban. There were better wizards, more capable people already there."

Harry took a deep breath trying to ignore the man's words. He had done this in Occlumency lessons before, trying wind Harry up so he would lose control of his temper and his shields would fall.

"The mutt was a fool."

All around him he heard as his classmates muttered their incantations under their breaths. Frustrated
as another hex struck him Harry yelled, "Protego!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Potter. Did you not hear that we were working on Nonverbal Spells today?" Snape demanded.
The rest of the class fell silent as they watched the exchange between Harry and the professor. Harry shrugged.

"It is polite to answer a question when asked, Potter."

"Yeah, well, it's polite not to spit in somebody's face too. I reckon it's probably better not to say anything." Harry bit out.

"Detention Potter," Snape snapped.

"What else is new?" Harry said with another shrug.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor," Snape said as the bell rang.
Harry sheathed his wand and collected his bag. He didn't look back to the professor. He had enough detentions with the man to know the when and where.

"What was that?" Hermione demanded as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry pushed the hair out of his face. "He was going on and on about Sirius. He said that he deserved it. If he had been smarter he wouldn't have gone." He took a breath forcing the wave of emotions that threatened to spill over.

Harry tried to push them under his shields. After the incident at the Ministry Dumbledore was fairly certain Voldemort wouldn't try and force his way into Harry's mind once more. He wouldn't let his own thoughts accidentally be viewed by the teen either placing up serious wards in his own mind.

"So you..." Hermione began.

"I lost my bloody temper," Harry admitted.

"Is that what he wanted?" Neville asked, speaking for the first time.

Harry nodded, "Yeah. He wanted me to lose it. I make mistakes then."

"Don't you think the point was rather for you not to lose your temper," Hermione corrected. "He wants you to be able to control yourself, keep your mind calm no matter the circumstances."

"Oi," Ron said clapping a hand on each of Harry's shoulders, "that was bloody brilliant mate. You showed the slimy git you're not going to take any of his nonsense."

"Harry lost his temper and Gryffindor twenty points," Hermione reminded Ron.

"That's too bad," Ron agreed. "I'd have loved to see Snape's face if you had spit on him."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron's musing, "Idiot."
"Are you Harry Potter," a small first or second year Hufflepuff asked Harry at dinner the Wednesday of their second week back at school.

Harry nodded. He took the extended roll of parchment.

"What's that," Neville asked looking away from his Herbology notes.

"It's from Dumbledore," Harry said spotting the familiar slanting handwriting.

"Why does the headmaster want you?" Hermione asked, "You're not a Prefect."

"I don't think it's about that or even Quidditch," Harry confirmed. "No, I think this might have to do with the prophecy."

"You never told us what that said," Neville reminded Harry.

"I know," Harry agreed, "but he said I wasn't supposed to share it. I'll see if let me tell you now. I know whatever it is, I'm going to need help. I could never do it alone."

"That's a very nice thing to say but I don't think it's true," Hermione objected.

Harry raised one eyebrow in disbelief.

"Don't do that mate," Ron requested. "It makes you look like a miniature Snape or something."

Harry ignored the redhead's interjection for the moment, "It's the truth, Hermione. I would have been killed by the devil snare in first year if it weren't for you and Neville. You two have been with me every step of the way."

Hermione nodded, "Fine, but don't expect him to say yes. You'll have to accept his answer. I'm sure he has his reasons for doing such things."

Harry shrugged, "I guess."

"When is your lesson?" Neville asked bringing the conversation back to where it began.

"Tonight," Harry said looking at the paper once more, "eight o'clock."

"Do you have any idea this was coming?"

Harry shook his head, "He didn't say anything when we went to talk Slughorn."

"Maybe he will be teaching you advanced magic," Hermione suggested.

"Maybe," Harry agreed.

Harry left his friends in Gryffindor Tower that evening as they worked together on Professor Flitwick's latest assignment. He mumbled the password, "Cockroach Clusters" and waited for the stone gargoyle to move aside. It hopped out the way at once. He was a few minutes early so he did not rush up the slowly ascending staircase.

"Come in," Dumbledore called as soon as the stairs came to a halt outside his door.

Harry pushed it open, "Sorry sir," he said spotting the other man in the office.

"Don't apologize, my boy, Professor Snape was just leaving," the headmaster informed the teen.
Snape raised a curious eyebrow. "We can discuss this in greater detail later, Severus."

"As you wish, Headmaster," said Professor Snape. "I trust you are not going to cause the headmaster any unnecessary trouble."
Harry nodded.

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. I have asked Harry here tonight. There's no need to concern yourself," Dumbledore said.

"I expect you to be at your best behavior Potter," Snape warned.

"Yes sir," Harry agreed.

Snape gave the boy one more evaluating look before rising from his seat. "Headmaster, Potter," he said as a farewell.

"What was he on about," Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Professor Snape worries that I may be stretching myself too thin," Dumbledore explained. "He can be a bit of a mother hen at times. His concerns are unfounded, my boy. There is no need to look so worried." He added at the boy's anxious expression.

"Yes sir," Harry said hesitantly. He wasn't sure what to think of that comment. Harry had never seen Snape worry disproportionately about anything. What was the head of the school doing differently that was so troubling? Was it something to do with the man's blackened hand? He would have to set those questions aside for now. Instead, he asked,

"What are we going to talk about sir?"

"Harry, I am going to give you what you need to defeat Voldemort," Dumbledore said seriously.

Harry sat up a little bit straighter in his seat. What sort of special magic might he learn from one of the greatest wizards to ever live?

"Since the night of James and Lily's deaths, I have known Voldemort would return. It was not a matter of if, but rather when. In the decade and a half, I have spent a great deal of time and energy doing my best to learn all I can about the man that became a monster." Dumbledore explained. "I want you to see, to learn all that I have about Voldemort."

The man moved and placed a large stone bowl in the center of the table. Harry recognized it, it was the Pensieve from fourth year.

Dumbledore continued, "We are going to be entering the memories of those who have had important interactions with Voldemort. These experiences helped to shape him into the man we now know."

"Errrr sir," Harry protested, "Professor Snape said..."

"Severus said you are not to enter the memories of another without their consent. That is true. It is a most grieve betrayal to do so. These memories were all consensually given to me and you will be viewing them with me." Dumbledore clarified.

Harry relaxed slightly. Dumbledore motioned the boy to stand.

"You just need to break the surface of the memory, Harry. I will be right behind you," Dumbledore instructed.
Harry placed his face to the silver, glimmering surface and then he was falling ... falling...

He stood at the corner of two roads. An oddly dressed little man stood a few feet away from him looking up at the signs trying to ascertain which direction to continue down to locate his destination.

Harry and Dumbledore followed the odd little man down the road as he met a young, handsome, impeccably dressed Muggle gentleman and his companion, a pretty young woman. He left to have an unfortunate encounter with some of the foulest people Harry had ever seen. The father was worse than Uncle Vernon on his worst days. The brother made Dudley look absolutely cuddly.

These people were to become Voldemort's parents, the Muggle young man, Tom Riddle would be his father, the terrorized girl his mother, Merope Gaunt. Voldemort's father and uncle would go to Azkaban shortly after this memory took place. Marvolo, the grandfather would never return. He died in Azkaban a little over a year into his sentence. His son would survive, the last member of a once noble house, heirs of Slytherin, that fell to ruins. The loss of the last heirlooms was what troubled Morfin Gaunt the most.

"What can you tell me, Harry?" Dumbledore requested once they returned to the office.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, sir."

"Think back to when the Ministry official first arrived. Why do you think he had difficulties understanding him?"

"You-Know-Who wasn't the only Parslemouth in his family," Harry guessed.

"Harry, I really do not care for all this You-Know-Who business. Call him by his name. Do not give into his silly beliefs that he is beyond all others," Dumbledore requested.

Harry shook his head, "Professor Snape said that I can't say that name. That's how the Death Eaters found us last year in the Department of Mysteries."

"If you will not call him Voldemort, perhaps we can call him by his true name, the one his mother gave him, Tom," Dumbledore suggested.

"Yes sir," Harry acquiesced.

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"What in the name of Merlin is Looney Lovegood wearing," Ron asked the table at large.

"Don't call her that," Harry and Ginny snapped together. The fifth year Ravenclaw was coming towards Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team as they ate breakfast before heading down to the field. The girl had a larger than life lion's head atop her own. Its jaws were open as if mid-roar.

Harry got to his feet to greet her as she approached, "Hey Luna."

"Hullo Harry," she replied. "I wanted to wish you good luck in your match today."

"Thanks," with a crooked grin Harry said, "I like your hat."
"I wanted to have it eating a snake for your defeat of Slytherin, but I ran out of time," Luna explained. "However, it does do this." A small motion of her wand the hat let out a realistic roar.

People all over the Great Hall jumped out of their seats in a combination of shock and terror at the unexpected sound. Professor McGonagall startled by the sound dropped a huge stack of books. "Five points from Ravenclaw for that Miss Lovegood. Do not do that again indoors."

"Sorry," Harry muttered.

Luna was unfazed by the docking of points from her house.

"Is there anything else?" Harry asked.

Luna tilted her head to the side for a moment before standing tiptoe to place her lips firmly against Harry's. The boy stood there in stunned silence for what seemed like forever before finally moving his lips in response. Seamus let out a long wolf whistle.

"Five points from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw for inappropriate displays of affection," Professor Snape growled as Harry and Luna broke apart.

Harry tried and failed to hide the blush overtaking him.

"If you and Miss Lovegood are done with your amorous displays Potter I would suggest you and your team head to the pitch," Snape said, still standing only a few feet away from Harry and Luna.

"Yes sir," Harry said, the daze of the unexpected kiss continuing to hang over him.

"Maybe I won't be the only one lucky today," Ron chuckled as he slapped Harry on the back.

Luna frowned at the redhead heading out of the hall. "What did he mean by that?"

Harry shook his head, "It's Ron. He's just being an arse as usual. Professor Snape's right, I better go. I'll see you after?"

"Of course," Luna said giving him another peck on the lips.

"Brilliant," Harry said to her before turning to his team, "Come on you lot, let's get down to the pitch." Harry was grinning ear to ear as he bounced his way to the pitch.

"Potter looks like he just won a thousand galleons," a third year Ravenclaw observed.

"Did you see Potter snog Lovegood," asked another.

Harry ignored their comments. He needed to focus on the match. The match against Slytherin was likely to be their hardest of the season and his first as captain. He wanted to start off as a strong leader like Oliver and Angelina had been. He never realized how hard their job really was.

Harry changed in silence in the locker room. He slowly counted back from one hundred as firmed up his shields, shoving the excitement and nervousness under them. His thoughts back on the match Harry gave his team a short address. That was another thing he didn't know was so hard. He felt bad now giving Oliver such a hard time about it.

Harry lead his team out onto the field. Where Malfoy should have stood was Slytherin, the only girl on the team. Malfoy was not playing Seeker in today's game. That was strange as the boy prided himself on his skill at the game. Harry made a mental note of the absence to mention to Hermione and Neville later. Harry shook hands with the other team's captain, refusing to flinch despite his
crushing fingers.

Madame Hooch kicked open the crate of balls and they were off. Zacharias Smith was this match’s commentator, Harry did his best to ignore the boy’s pompous remarks about Harry and his team. He did approve of his new Beater, Jimmy Peaks sending a Bludger at the blonde Hufflepuff’s head, even if it cost them a penalty shot. Ron was able to catch it in a rather remarkable save.

The game came to a close with Harry catching the Snitch after almost ramming into the teacher’s box as it flew just above Smith's head. Even over the cheer of the crowd, you could still make out the sound of Luna's roaring lion hat.

Harry changed out of his sweaty uniform, the last to leave. Hermione was waiting for him as always. This time they were joined by Luna too. She still wore her ridiculous hat.

"Hey, where's Neville?" Harry asked his Firebolt under one arm.

"He went back to the Tower with Ginny, oh, what would you say, Luna, twenty minutes ago?" Hermione asked.

Luna nodded.

"Ron will love that," Harry mumbled.

"I don't think he noticed. He was a bit busy trying to bite Lavender lips off," Hermione said with disgust.

"Have'n't Ginny and Neville been dating since the Yule Ball?" Luna asked.

Harry nodded, "Yeah, but ever since their dad was killed Ron's been sort of weird. He has been more protective of Ginny. Like it's his duty now or something."

Hermione agreed. "Maybe him having a girlfriend of his own will mean he lets Ginny and Neville be." Spotting Harry and Luna's linked hands she added, "I see Ronald isn't the only one to have a new girlfriend."

"Errrr..." Harry looked at Luna, "Is that what we're calling it?"

"What else would we be?" Luna asked.

Harry shrugged, "I don't know."

Changing the topic Hermione asked. "Harry, I need you to tell me the truth. Did you put something in Ron's drink this morning?"

"That would be against the rules," Harry objected.

"Harry," Hermione whined, "I saw you. I should have gone straight to Professor McGonagall."

"I didn't do anything," Harry insisted. He released Luna's hand to remove a small glass bottle from his robes. "See? It was a little sleight of hand. Still sealed, I needed Ron to think I put it in there, give him a boost of confidence."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, "I'm glad I didn't go to Professor McGonagall."

"Me too," Harry agreed. "Honestly Hermione, I would never cheat at Quidditch."
"Why did you choose him as Keeper if he has so many problems?" Luna asked taking his hand once more.

"Ron doesn't have too many. It's mostly his self-confidence." Harry explained, "and the next best was a complete nightmare. I have never met anyone more full of themselves than Cormac McLaggen."

The three talked about the game the rest of the way to the castle. Luna made to return to her own dorm as they walked up to the Gryffindor Tower.

"You're not coming with us?" A confused Harry asked.
"She can't come into our Common Room," Hermione reminded him.

"I know," he turned back to Luna. "Come with us. I'll grab us some plates and then we can go find somewhere together."

Luna fell back into step with the two Gryffindors. Harry squeezed her hand once before stepping through the portrait hole. The painting swung back in place leaving Luna standing by herself in the silent hallway.

The common room was with excited chatter as everyone ate and drank their victory. Harry was greeted with a round of applause. He bowed in acknowledgment as everyone returned to their conversations.

"Took you long enough to get here," Ginny said joining Harry at the refreshment table.

Harry shrugged, "Well, not all of us rush to post match celebration like there's a blast-end swkert on their heals."

"That's my brother," Ginny objected. It was then the youngest Weasley noticed how many plates Harry was preparing. "Are you taking eating lessons from Ron now?"

"What," Harry frowned.

Ginny motioned to the plates.

The realization dawned on Harry, "Oh, I'm making one for Luna. We're going to find somewhere to talk."

"Just talk?" Ginny teased.

"Ginny," Harry groaned. "That's none of your business."

"And it's none of my brothers', but it never stopped any of them asking," came her quick reply.

"I'm not...it's not... we're not siblings," Harry protested.

"Mum says you're as good has one of hers. Means you get all the siblings too, not just the cooking."

Ginny informed him.

Harry pondered the comment, "Ginny, does it bother..."

"What's going on Harry? I saw Luna Lovegood waiting outside just now," Dean asked interrupting their conversation.

"She's waiting for me," Harry explained.
"Good luck with that one mate," Dean said with a grin.

Ginny rolled her eyes, "You shouldn't leave Luna waiting, Harry."

"I know," Harry said slipping a couple of bottles of butter into his pockets. "I'll see you later, Gin."

"Have fun," she said turning back to answer whatever question Dean had asked her. It was harder going through of the portrait hole this time.

"Here you go," Harry said offering Luna one of the plates.

"Where should we go?" Luna asked.

Harry frowned, "Maybe the Room of Requirements?"

Luna nodded in approval as she took her plate.

"What should we ask the room to provide?" Luna asked a floor below their destination.

"A place to talk," Harry suggested.

They walked back and forth in front of where the door to the room was hidden thinking of the desired space. On the third turn, a door appeared but refused to open when Harry tugged on the handle.

"That's strange," Harry mumbled.

"Someone may be in there," Luna suggested.

"Who would be there at this time," Harry asked.

Luna raised an eyebrow.

Harry shrugged, "I mean..."

"Why don't we find a classroom," Luna suggested.

Harry nodded. When they reached the corner to go downstairs Harry noticed the door to the Room of Requirements open. He doesn't think the person can see him from the top of the stairs, but he can see them. There is no mistaking that blonde hair, it was Malfoy using the room. What could the boy up to?

Luna's tug on his hand brought him back to the present. The kiss she plants on him as soon as they enter the empty room drives all thoughts of the Slytherin from his mind. Harry didn't even think about where the boy may have been during the Quidditch match until he spotted the boy the next morning at breakfast. Malfoy was in an intense conversation with Crabbe and Goyle, about what Harry did not know. Harry told Hermione and Neville once again he was certain Malfoy was plotting something. Neither were as certain as Harry that such a thing was true, but it was Ginny that reminded him that Professor Snape told him to mind his own business. Could the Potions Master know what the boy was planning? Malfoy didn't seem to trust the man the way he used to? Did Malfoy suspect Snape was a spy? That wasn't possible, was it? Harry had to know what Malfoy was up to, for everyone's safety.

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“I don’t know if I want to go to Hogsmeade,” Hermione said as she sat with Harry, Luna, Neville, and Ginny at breakfast.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“I don’t want to be a fifth wheel,” Hermione complained.

“You won’t be,” Neville reassured.

“Where’s Viktor?” Ginny asked instead.

“Bulgaria, I think. He has a match coming up on the continent,” Hermione answered as she stabbed at her porridge frustrated gesture.

“Fred and George are going to be in the village. You wouldn’t want to miss them,” Ginny urged.

Hermione looked at her friend curiously.

“They told me in their last letter that they wanted to look at a space in Hogsmeade. Really, I think they want to check on me and Ron,” the youngest Weasley explained.

“It’s nice they want to see you,” Neville observed.

Ginny shrugged. “I’m sure Mum put them up to it. Fred and George only show they care by taking the mickey out of you.”

Harry chuckled, “They’re not that bad, Gin.”

“You say that after living with them for fifteen years,” Ginny shot back. “You never saw them at their worst.”

“Are you going to come?” Neville asked redirecting the conversation back to Hermione,

“I’ll think about it,” she conceded.

Hermione did accompany the quartet down to the village. Ginny was supposed to be meeting the twins and Ron at the Three Broomsticks at noon before their one o’clock appointment. After that, the four would be free to spend the afternoon in the village as they wished.

It was a horribly cold and windy day as they walked down the sloping grounds to the village. Hats were pulled down low and scarves wrapped tightly around people’s faces trying not to freeze. The howling wind made it almost impossible to be heard the students resorting to gesturing to communicate to their friends.

The five arrived in the village a bit early for their meeting with the twins. Hermione indicated she needed some more parchment and begged off into Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop. Harry had little interest in the stationary store and was hesitant to enter. Luna took his hand, pulling him down the high street.

With no hesitation, she pulled him into the frilly chamber of Madame Pettifoot’s tea room.

“How are we here?” Harry asked, pulling the red and gold scarf away from his frozen features.

“I thought I rather fancied a nice snog,” Luna replied as they were lead to a small table.

Harry couldn’t help but notice a number of other couples looked up as they passed by. His relationship with the mad Ravenclaw was still a matter of discussion on the school rumor mill he
knew even after it was unceremoniously announced to all of Hogwarts when Luna kissed him in the Great Hall. He didn’t like the comments that he occasionally heard speculating about what the girl might have done to claim him as her boyfriend. From what he could tell, Luna took little to no notice of such remarks.

“Do you think they’ll wonder where we went?” Harry asked as he let Luna place their order. He was still new to this dating thing and sometimes had a hard time knowing how he was supposed to balance it with his group of friends.

“No,” Luna stated matter of fact, “I told Ginny where we were going.”

“Oh,” Harry mumbled.

“They won’t leave Hermione alone,” Luna assured him. “It wouldn’t be very kind of us to make her feel like she isn’t wanted. Even if it’s not our fault Viktor to stay to prepare for this match even when she asked him to come this weekend specifically.”

“She did?” Harry asked.

“Oh yes,” Luna confirmed. “He said he would like to come but this match was too important to his team’s standings or something.”

“Well, it is his job,” Harry sympathized.

Luna frowned, “Hermione feels he isn’t being very serious. He should be doing something to support the war, not just flying around on a silly broomstick.”

“How do we know he’s not?” Harry asked. “People are doing all sorts of things to fight You-Know-Who. We don’t know what all of them are up to, maybe Krum just looks like he’s playing Quidditch so he won’t draw attention.”

Luna gave him a disapproving look.

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t say that’s actually what he’s doing, just that it could be.”

The waitress returned with their tea and sandwiches. Harry didn’t really want any of them. The eyes of their schoolmates were on them once more.

“Errrr….. Luna…..” Harry mumbled.

“Yes,” she said selecting one of the small crust-less sandwiches from the tray in front of her.

“Would it be okay if we…. Errr…. If we didn’t stay?” Harry asked nervously.

“Is it that people are looking?” Luna asked as she dunked her sandwich into her tea. She paid the onlookers no mind.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

“She suggested after finishing her first sandwich. Harry stared at her.

“There is nothing interesting about us now. Should we maybe give them something more to talk about?” Luna said once more. Harry shook his head. “No. That’s okay.”
“I said when we came in here that I wanted a proper snog Harry Potter,” Luna said setting her tea and sandwiches aside.

“Oh,” Harry mumbled. Still, he felt awkward. He could see multiple couples (at least the girls looking over to him and Luna. When Harry didn’t move in Luna took it on herself to make the first move. The dumbfounded boy eventually got the clue and responded to her kiss. He lost himself in her lips. He didn’t care anybody about the other tables watching them.

A loud bang drew him back to the real world. He had no idea how long it had been.

“Where’s the cannon?” He asked stupidly.

“We need to go to the Three Broomsticks now,” Luna informed him. “It’s ten to noon.”

“Right,” Harry said his senses fully restored. He paid for the tea as Luna gathered their things. They pulled on their cloaks and scarves making sure they were fully dressed before heading out into the cold once more. They walked hand in hand as they made their way up the high street.

“That’s Dung,” Harry said spotting a man outside the Three Broomsticks.

Harry wasn’t sure Luna had understood him as he pointed to the man. Mundungus was talking to another wizard, a large case in his arms.

“Oi Dung,” Harry greeted as he and Luna met him outside the pub.

“Oh, ‘ello, ‘Arry,” Mundungus said shifting from one foot to the other.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked.

“I had a… business opportunity…” Mundungus said looking for an escape.

“Harry,” Luna said picking up a goblet that sat by Mundungus’ foot, “Isn’t this the Black family crest?”

Harry turned to the blonde a furrow between his brows. He took the goblet turning it over in his hand. “What the Hell!” Harry turned to the man. “These were Sirius’! You thief!”

Mundungus Apparated away.

“Coward!” Harry yelled where the hangdog-faced wizard had once stood.

“He can’t hear you,” a woman said from behind Harry and Luna. Harry turned to see who it was who spoke.

“Wotcher Harry,” Tonks said. Her face was pale despite the cold. Harry could see a bit of hair sticking out from under her cap, the same limp blonde he had seen her with on the train.

“He’s stealing Sirius’ things… My things and selling them,” Harry complained.

Tonks shrugged. “I’ll see what we can do. You two should go inside. I saw Fred and George go in already.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll see you around?”

Tonks nodded back, “I’m stationed at Hogwarts for the moment if you need me.”
“Goodbye,” Luna said slipping past Harry into the pub.

Harry watched for a moment as the once vibrant Auror walked down the near vacant street. She disappeared down an alley a few stores down. Harry wondered how close she and Sirius had been if his death was upsetting her this much. He shook his head as he entered the pub. Fred and George had managed to claim seats close to the fire, the others already sitting with them.

Fred rose to greet the new arrivals, “Harry my good man, and the lovely Luna.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the twin. Luna extended her hand to Fred but he was intercepted by his mirror image. George leaned over and placed an overly-dramatic kiss on her hand.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Luna,” George said doing his best impersonation of Percy. “How is your health?”

“Knock it off George,” Ginny ordered as she passed mugs of Butterbeer to Harry and Luna.

George sighed, “Fine,” as he took his seat once more. “You managing alright there Harry?” Fred asked. “We heard Snape took it out on you the other day?”

Harry looked from Hermione to Neville, both shook their heads. Ron blushed slightly.

Harry shrugged, “No worse than normal. I’m still having some problems with nonverbals.”

“They’re not so hard,” George reassured. “You just go to put your mind ahead of your mouth.”

“Right,” Harry agreed non-committedly. Redirecting the conversation to the twins he asked, “How are things with the shop?”

“Absolutely mad,” Fred said with a grin. “We just got another order from the Ministry. We had to bring on an extra person to deal with the owl orders we’re receiving.”

“That’s excellent,” Harry said with a smile.

“How many fanged Frisbees have you confiscated Hermione?” George asked.

“A number, are you selling them now?” She replied over the rim of her mug of Butterbeer.

“But of course,” George grinned.

After the discussion of the store, the group talked about Gryffindor’s chances for the Quidditch Cup this year. Harry thought they were high. He liked how the team was coming along. Even the new Beaters were doing pretty well, though no one could ever replace Fred and George.

As they gathered their things Harry saw a familiar blonde head make his way to the bathroom. Harry kept his eyes on Malfoy until Luna tugged him away. The group talked outside of the establishment for a while.

“Katie,” a girl called.

“I have to get this to Dumbledore,” the other girl said ignoring her friend.

Harry frowned at the voice. It was Katie Bell. What could she have for Dumbledore?

“Katie,” the girl begged.
“Harry are you okay?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. He motioned to the scuffle that broke out between Katie and her friend. The others turned to look as Katie began to rise up into the air, her face contorted into a silent scream. Harry ran for the girls, Fred and George right behind him. Katie had landed in a graceless lump on the street by the time the boys reached her and her friend.

“We need to let somebody at the castle know what happened,” Harry said reaching out to check on his Chaser.

George drew his wand casting a Patronus, the silver coyote running off into the distance. The unmistakable form of Hagrid appeared coming out of one of the shops.

“Hagrid,” Neville called the half-giant to them. “’Lo Neville,” Hagrid said.

“There’s been an accident. Katie needs to get to the Hospital Wing right away,” the round-faced boy explained.

The Care of Magical Creatures professor scooped the injured girl up with no hesitation. He ran off her as if she weighed more than a bag of crisps.

“What happened?” Harry demanded of Katie’s friend.

The girl shook her head. Her thin frame was racked with sobs.

“It’s Leanne,” Hermione asked more softly. The girl nodded this time.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Hermione asked softly.

“We were in the Three Broomsticks,” Leanne began. Her voice was tight as she tried to speak around her tears. “She went to the bathroom before we went back to the castle. She came back and was acting strangely. She said she had to speak to Professor Dumbledore. She had this package too.”

“This one?” Harry asked the package sitting on the muddy ground a few feet away.

Leanne nodded again.

“I don’t think you should touch that,” Hermione warned. Harry carefully removed his scarf wrapping it around the package. “We need to take this to the castle. They might need it to help Katie.”

Hermione relented. Professor McGonagall was waiting for them as they arrived in the main hall of the castle.

“I bet Malfoy has something to do with this,” Harry said as he paced the length of the office.

“It doesn’t really matter right now mate,” Fred said. “What matters now is that Katie is okay.”

“But if it’s Malfoy,” Harry insisted.

“Not now Harry,” George dismissed.

“Why do you think it’s Malfoy?” Neville asked as he sat with Ginny, her small hands intertwined
with his larger one.

“I saw him going to the bathroom just before we left,” Harry explained.

“Let’s not talk about this now,” Hermione urged. She sat next to Leanne trying to comfort the still distraught girl.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled. He walked another lap of the room.

Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore arrived sometime later. All were thanked for their quick action if they had not got Katie to the castle as quickly as they had she might not have survived. Madame Pomfrey was doing her best. The girl would most likely have to be transferred to St. Mungo’s in London. If she recovered maybe should tell them what happened until then all they could do was wait and hope.
"How is Katie, sir," Harry asked. It was three days after the Chaser was attacked in Hogsmeade. The Headmaster had summoned Harry to his office earlier in the afternoon for their next lesson.

"She has been transferred to St. Mungo's. She will receive the remainder of her care there," Dumbledore answered.

"Do they think she'll be alright?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Her condition is improving. The healers are hopeful she will make a complete recovery."

"Do you know who did it?" Harry inquired.

"I cannot say that I have that information," the old wizard observing Harry over the rims of his half-moon spectacles."Do you have an idea of who hurt Ms. Bell, Harry?"

"You should talk to Malfoy," Harry said at once.

"Why Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore asked gently.

"I saw him going into the bathrooms just before Katie came out acting all weird," Harry explained. "He's also acting all weird. When we went to Diagon Alley we ran into him. He wouldn't let Madam Malkin see his arm. He left his mother to do something in Knockturn Alley."

Dumbledore raised a curious eyebrow at Harry's description of the Malfoy heir's movement especially as the boy continued.

Harry blazed on, "He went into Borgin and Burkes after that. He was threatening Borgin with something. I think Malfoy has the Dark Mark."

"I doubt that Voldemort is desperate enough to need the assistance of sixteen-year-old school boys, Harry," Dumbledore said dismissively.

"I doubt that Voldemort is desperate enough to need the assistance of sixteen-year-old school boys, Harry," Dumbledore said dismissively.

"He has something on his arm. He showed it to Borgin who went all pale," Harry insisted.

"That is enough of that, Harry," Dumbledore said speaking more firmly than Harry ever had ever heard. "Mr. Malfoy is no concern of yours. Your professors and I are well aware of what is going on at Hogwarts. We are here today to discuss Voldemort and how he came to power."

"Yes sir," Harry reluctantly agreed.

Dumbledore proceeded with the lesson. "In our last lesson, we discussed Voldemort's family. The next period is largely based on speculation. Merope Gaunt ran away from her family, stealing her father's ring and taking the necklace that bore Slytherin's crest. They were the last remaining heirs to the once great house.

"How Marope came to marry Tom Riddle is not exactly clear. I believe she placed him under a love potion for a time. They married and she became pregnant in short order. I believe she stopped giving Tom the love potion either thinking that Tom Riddle Sr. would have fallen in love with her, or the presence of the child would be enough to keep him there. Neither was the case. Tom fled telling everyone who would listen how he had been bewitched.

"Merope Gaunt died shortly after giving birth to her son, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Named for his father
and hers respectively. He was left in the care of a Muggle orphanage in London. It is here when we meet a ten-year old Tom Riddle our story resumes.

Harry entered the memory watching as a much younger Dumbledore discussed the child Lord Voldemort with the head of the orphanage. The mistress spoke of strange occurrences, odd behaviors the boy exhibited. Harry saw these at once when they went upstairs to meet the child in question. The boy was suspicious, quick to anger, a thief, proud that he could control others. He had hurt other children that had upset him.

Dumbledore noted that all of these traits continued on as Voldemort grew older, even causing others pain. The Dark Mark burned when he wished to summon his followers. The keeping of trophies was another thing they could assume continued. Voldemort liked to have mementos of his victories. This would be something they would need to keep in mind for future lessons. Harry was dismissed for the evening. Their next lesson would be some time after the Christmas holidays.

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"You've got to come home with us," Ron insisted.

"I don't want to be a burden," Harry whined.

"Mum's been driving me balmy all year. Ever since Dad, she has been sending more packages and everything. She wants to make this Christmas special. Everyone is coming, even Charlie all the way from Romania." Ron explained.

"They're your family," Harry argued.

"So are you if you ask Mum," Ron replied. "If she could have, she would have brought you straight to the Burrow every year."

Harry looked away from Ron to Ginny.

"He's telling the truth," the youngest Weasley confirmed.

Harry nodded, "I know." He sighed, "I just don't..."

"Want to be a burden," Ron finished. "We get it, mate. Mum will kill us if you don't come. It's the first Christmas without Dad and Sirius. Nobody should be alone."

"I won't be alone," Harry said defensively.

That wasn't true, however, he had talked to Professor McGonagall last night. Not a single other student had signed up to stay at Hogwarts for the length of the winter break. Only a very few were planning on returning early.

"You should go," Hermione urged. "Christmas might be harder than you expect. I know my mum always misses her parents more during the holidays."

Harry shrugged, "Christmas isn't that important to me, Hermione."

"But it is important to my mum," Ginny remarked. "She wants you there. She'll be disappointed if you don't come." For good measure, she added, "Neville's gran is even letting him come to stay for a
few days."

Harry's head jerked to the aforementioned boy. "Really Neville?"

Neville nodded slowly. "I'll be there from Boxing Day to the day before New Year's Eve."

"Wow," Harry breathed.

Mrs. Longbottom always wanted Neville home for the length of the holidays. She wasn't opposed to him having visitors but she liked knowing where he was and in the secure wards of their home. She wanted to keep him safe as she could after what had happened to his parents after the first fall of Voldemort.

"So you'll come?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, let me tell Professor McGonagall I've changed my plans before you go owling your mum."

Instead of the annoyed expression, he expected from the Deputy Headmistress he only received a relieved smile and the offer of a ginger newt. Harry took one of the biscuits in question without comment. Apparently, his Head of House too believed he should not be alone for the holidays.

Classes ended for the term, unlike in previous years with the last lessons before holidays merely being a review, a way to keep the students busy, all of Harry's professors continued to teach new material. The one exception to this being Professor Slughorn. The Potions instructor instead asked them to brew something cheerful. There would be a prize for the person with the best choice.

"I hope you will make it to my party tonight, Harry." Professor Slughorn said as Harry ran a finger down the table of contents trying to find something that would fit the man's criteria.

"Yes sir," Harry mumbled as he read the names under his breath.

"You've missed all the others," Slughorn observed.

Harry shrugged, "Quidditch, you know. We can only get the pitch at certain times."

"Ahhh... well, I am glad you will make it to tonight's gathering. There are some interesting people I would like for you to meet."

"Yes sir," Harry agreed settling on a Cheering Draught.

"Will Luna be coming with you," Hermione asked.

Harry nodded as he chopped his ginger root. "Is Viktor coming with you?"

Hermione frowned. "No, he isn't available. Personally, I believe he doesn't want to meet Professor Slughorn. "I've told him about how he collects people."

"I wouldn't go if I didn't have to," Harry told her honestly.

"They're not that bad, Harry. They can be sort of fun." With Harry's skeptical look she added, "The food is always really nice."

Harry snorted. Leave it to Hermione to find any possible way to defend a professor even when she didn't like them too much.
"Since Viktor can't come you should bring someone else, as a friend," Harry suggested.

"Who?" Hermione asked. "Ginny is already taking Neville."

"What about Fred or George?" Harry offered. "They could make even the worst party entertaining. Just imagine if they slipped a whole batch of canary creams into the desserts."

Hermione snickered beside herself. "I'll think about it. It's awfully short notice."

"They'll do it if you ask them," Harry insisted. He hoped she brought one of them. He hadn't seen either of them since the day with Katie. It would be nice to see them not connecting them with such a horrible moment.

Harry reminded Luna of the evening’s engagement as they sat together at lunch. He thought about asking her not to wear her butterbeer cork earrings then reconsidered it. He wondered what Slughorn would say about his choice of guest or her uniquely Luna sense of fashion. That was if she didn't start talking about nargles in the mistletoe.

Luna was one of the brightest in her year, yet hadn't been invited to participate in the Slug Club. Harry could only guess it was all the strange little things that made most think she was totally mad, and he loved her all the more if that stopped the pompous Potions professor from seeing her talent.

When Harry met Luna in the entrance hall to go down to the party she had chosen to leave the butterbeer corks at home. Instead, she wore large Christmas bobbles in each ear.

"I like the earrings," Harry said kissing her.

Luna smiled airily up at him. Harry took her hand as they walked down the stairs down to the dungeon together.

"Mr. Potter," Slughorn greeted them jovially at the door to the converted Potions classroom. "I was just discussing your Potions abilities with Severus. I was just saying how much they remind me of your mother. That must be where you get your talent."

Harry shrugged, "I don't know, sir. I don't remember her. All I know about her is from other people's memories."

"Did I mention that Harry here brewed a nearly perfect Draught of Living Death during our first class?" Slughorn asked.

"No," Snape said surveying the boy.

"It was most fantastic," Slughorn said with a great deal of cheer.

"I never saw Potter as more than a competent brewer," Snape said tersely.

Harry frowned. The man didn't have to insult his abilities in front of other teachers, wasn't it bad enough when he did it when they were alone? Luna gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. Harry forced his annoyance under his shields. There was no reason to get upset over something as trivial as a petty insult to keep Snape's cover.

"Excuse me, sir," Harry said stepping away, "I need a drink."

Harry moved he and Luna away to the refreshment table.

"H'llo Harry," Fred greeted, "Hi Luna."
"You here with Hermione?" Harry asked handing a bottle of butterbeer to Luna.

"Not at the moment," Fred said cagily.

Harry's brow furrowed.

"We're trying to see how long it takes for ol' Sluggy to catch on there's more than one of us," Fred explained.

Harry let out a bark of laughter drawing the attention of several others standing nearby.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled.

The others turned back to their conversations.

"Where is she now?" Harry asked.

Fred pointed to the corner where Hermione stood. She had a finger up at was shaking it at an elderly wizard. There was no way of knowing what the two were discussing from this distance but Hermione was debating it with great passion.

"Poor bloke used to work for the Control of Magical Creatures office," Fred explained with a shake of his head. "He made the mistake of making a joke about house elves."

There was a collective intake of breath and shaking of heads.

After several more minutes of watching Hermione ferociously gesture at the man Harry asked, "Do you think maybe we should go rescue him?"

Fred shook his head, "There's George."

Harry watched as George expertly guided Hermione away from the conversation. She joined them still fuming.

"Can you believe what he said," Hermione asked once again.

George shook his head, "Nope."

"What did he say?" Harry asked.

"He implied that if our lovely Hermione grew up with house elves she would see they don't mind their treatment, "that they are naturally suited for it and enjoy the work". She should “not let the experience with a few abnormally minded house elves make her think otherwise”.

"Just shows how little he knows about our Hermione," Fred observed.

"Precisely my point," agreed George.

"That's no way to speak about Dobby," Harry complained.

"Ahhhh...Harry, there you are," Slughorn said spotting him once more. The man stopped looking at the Weasley twins. "By Jove, there are two of you."

Fred and George grinned.

"Come, Harry, I want you to meet Eldred Worple and his companion Sanguini," Slughorn said
pulling the boy away from his friends.

Harry sighed and followed, the man wanted to write a biography of Harry. His vampire companion, Sangini made Harry uncomfortable in the way he watched some of the younger girls pass by. A scuffle at the door allowed Harry to break away from the awkward conversation.

"I found him trying to sneak in," Filch told Professor Slughorn. He held Malfoy tightly by the upper arm.

"I was not," complained Malfoy. When the squib squeezed his arm he said, "Fine. I was trying to gatecrash. Let go of me," and was able to successfully jerk his arm away from the man.

"It's Christmas. Let the boy stay," Slughorn said with false cheer.

"Mr. Malfoy should learn that it not acceptable to go where he is not invited." Snape challenged taking the recently released arm in the same sore spot.

Malfoy looked like a toddler who was told they wouldn't be getting an ice cream after dinner. The boy struggled futilely to get Snape to release his arm. The man's long, pale fingers tightened around the boy's bicep.

"If you think that's best Severus," Slughorn said apprehensively.

"Was poor little Malfoy not invited to the party?" joked George.

"Slughorn doesn't seem much interested in the junior Death Eater set," Hermione confirmed. "The only one who comes close is Blaise Zabini. He doesn't really count, does he? His mother is just rich and beautiful."

"And deadly," added the twins together.

As he walked away from his friends to follow Malfoy and Snape Harry did his best to listen to what his friends were saying.

"She's been married seven times never more than two or three years at a time. All the husbands die in rather strange ways," explained Fred.

"You can't possibly think she's killed them all," protested Hermione. "For what purpose?"

"The same reason any does anything....money," replied George.

Hermione did not look convinced. "What do you think, Harry," she said turning to realize her friend was no longer there.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked Luna.

"He put on his cloak. I think he wanted to try and hear what Snape was saying to Malfoy," Luna said as if it was obvious. "I'm going to see if there is any pudding. Does anybody want some?"

Her three companions shook their head in silence.

"She's a bit mad that one," George observed.

"Just what Harry needs to keep him sane," said Fred.

Harry could almost hear Hermione rolling her eyes at the boys' statements. He lost the thread of the
conversation as he crossed the threshold of the cramped classroom.

"What do you think you are doing?" Snape demanded, inches from the teenager's face.

"I wanted to go the the party," Malfoy tried.

"You will have to do better than that," Snape snapped. "I have been dealing with better liars than you since before you were born."

Harry snickered, so he wasn't the only one Snape talked to like that. Snape's dark eyes shot in the dark haired boy's general direction. Had the man heard him? He couldn't have, could he? He had ears like a bat, that was certain enough.

Snape changed tactics. "What are you planning," he demanded of Malfoy his black eyes firmly fixed on Malfoy's grey ones.

"It's none of your business," Malfoy snapped back. He refused to make eye contact with his Head of House.

"None of my business," Snape repeated back. "I made your mother an Unbreakable Vow. I promised her I would keep you safe. Do you understand what would happen if I were to fail?"

"I didn't ask for you to do that," Malfoy pouted. To Harry, he sounded more like a spoiled seven-year-old rather than on the verge of turning seventeen.

"The vow was made, it cannot be undone. It would benefit you to accept the assistance you are offered," Snape warned.

"I don't need your help, I don't need anyone's help," Malfoy insisted.

Snape stepped back. "I suggest that you be more careful in the future. It was mere luck that saved the Bell girl's life. It would do you no favors to have attention drawn to yourself in regards to the death of a classmate."

Malfoy didn't respond to the comment, just stared moodily at his Head of House. Finally, the boy asked, "May I go...sir?"

Snape nodded. He watched in silence as the blonde head disappeared around the corner presumably in the direction of the Slytherin Common Room.

"Reveal yourself, Potter," Snape said when he was sure they were alone.

Harry hesitated unsure of what to do.

"I am losing my patience," Snape warned.

Harry pulled off the cloak at once not wanting to upset the man any further.

"If you still wish to become an Auror, Potter, you will have to drastically improve your skills in observation and surveillance," Snape said acidly.

Harry stared at his shoes, the jumbled knots of string suddenly fascinating.

Snape continued to speak. "It is unwise to listen at door knobs, Potter. Partial information can be extremely dangerous. You have no context for what is being said. Acting on limited information can lead to disastrous results."
"What's Malfoy up to?" Harry dared to ask.

"If you had paid attention, I was trying to ascertain that myself," Snape said rolling his eyes for good measure.

"But he's the one who hurt Katie, just like I said. We should tell Dumbledore." Harry insisted.

"If you believe that Dumbledore is not aware of everything that happens inside this castle you are a bigger fool than your father or Black," Snape said smoothly.

"Don't talk about my dad or Sirius that way," Harry snapped.

"Mind your tone, Potter," Snape hissed. "That's ten points from Gryffindor."

"Fine," Harry huffed. "What's an Unbreakable Vow?"

"I suggest you return to the party now I am sure all your little friends are wondering where you wandered off to," Snape said avoiding answering the question.

Harry nodded, "Yes sir."

"What's going on," Fred asked as Harry slipped back into the part. He hoped nobody noticed his conspicuous absence.

Harry shook his head. He collected Ginny and Neville making their excuses with the team captain of the Holyhead Harpies before leading them all to the Room of Requirements. The room was far simpler this time, several small couches and chairs arranged in a semicircle in front of a roaring fireplace.

Harry described all he had learned. The twins being able to shed light on what and how serious an Unbreakable Vow was. If a witch or wizard actively broke such an oath, they could lose all their magic or die. Even with all this, his friends had a hard time believing Malfoy could have been the one to hurt Katie or had taken the Dark Mark, let alone be under orders from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

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Mrs. Weasley wasn't the only one waiting for them when the youngest of the clan clambered of the fireplace at the Burrow. As promised all of the Weasley children had returned home for Christmas. Bill and Fleur would leave the day after Boxing Day to spent until New Years with her family. Charlie would be here until the youngest left back for school. Percy and the twins were commuting back and forth to work until Christmas and would only at the Burrow on Christmas Eve until dinner on Boxing Day.

To make up for their absence there were several other guests. The one Harry was most pleased to see was Remus. The werewolf looked even more drawn and scruffy than usual. His clothes were filthy when he arrived. Mrs. Weasley had forced him straight into the shower and took his all of his clothes for washing. She gave him an old set of Bill's pajamas to wear while they finished up. The taller and broader wizard's garments hung off of the exhausted werewolf comically.

"Mum, Dad's stuff would fit him much better," Bill observed.
"Of course you're right," Mrs. Weasley said to her oldest. "I don't know what I was thinking." Her voice was thick with emotion. "Let me get you something else, Remus."

"This is fine," Remus protested.

"Oi, Ron," Fred interjected, "Get Remus something to wear. Some of your kit would fit him fine."

The youngest Weasley boy hopped to his feet, taking the stairs two at a time.

"I don't know why I'm being so silly," Molly said falling into Mr. Weasley's favorite chair. "It's just clothes."

"It's fine, Molly," reassured Remus. "This is more than enough already. I shouldn't be imposing as it is."

"Don't be silly, Remus," Mrs. Weasley said wiping at her eyes, a tissue appearing from the depth of her sleeve. "We couldn't leave you out in the cold, with those...those monsters."

Harry didn't miss how the man tensed at the use of the word. He didn't say anything to Remus, waiting for his former professor to respond first.

"Excuse me, I need to check on dinner," Mrs. Weasley said moving from her chair back to the kitchen.

Once he knew she was gone, Harry said to Remus, "She didn't mean you, you know."

Remus shook his head.

"You just have..."

"Have a furry little problem," Remus supplied. "I know Molly did not mean me in particular. That there are many of my kind that truly are monsters. I have meant many of them on my mission for the Order."

"Why are they like that?" Harry asked.

"Most have lost their faith in wizard kind. They feel persecuted by their fellow wizards, that they are second class citizens." Remus explained. "Many do not trust me because I show the signs of having tried to blend into wizarding society."

"What else are you supposed to do?" Harry asked.

"Some believe we should break away from our fellow wizards and form a society of our own. One of the leaders of this school of thought is the werewolf that bit me as a child, Fenrir Greyback."

"Greyback," Harry repeated, "I know that name."

"He is a well-known werewolf he specializes in turning children," Remus supplied.

Harry shook his head. "That's not it." He played the name over in his head. "That was the name Malfoy mentioned when he went to see Borgin."

"What did Draco say about Greyback?" Remus asked.

"Nothing specific, he didn't want Borgin to sell something. He warned the man that he would have Greyback come and check on him if Malfoy needed help," Harry explained.
"You don't know what it was he didn't want Borgin to sell," Remus verified.

Harry nodded. "It must have been something that would have drawn attention to him if he were to carry it because he said he would. What do you think it could be?"

"I have no way of guessing that Harry. Borgin and Burkes sell any number of things," Remus replied.

"Malfoy is up to something though," Harry supplied. "Borgin paled when he showed him something on his arm. I think he's taken the Mark."

"I doubt that, Harry. He's a sixteen-year-old boy." Remus said skeptically.

Harry scoffed. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Voldemort has little reason to recruit underage children," Remus answered.

Harry scoffed, "Maybe it's punishment for his dad failing at the Ministry."

"Harry," Remus sighed. "Sometimes I think you spent too much fixating on Draco. I am sure the boy is up to nothing like what you are thinking."

Harry frowned. "Maybe I should talk to Tonks. She was in Hogsmeade when the attack on Katie happened. Maybe she saw where he was when it happened."

"You saw Tonks?" Remus asked, happy to change the subject of discussion.

Harry nodded.

"How did she look?" Remus asked.

Harry shrugged. "She was sort of pale, her hair was still brown."

Remus frowned.

A thought occurred to Harry, "Do you know why someone's Patronus might change?"

Remus' eyebrows rose in surprise, "Why do you ask?"

"Professor Snape said that Tonks' new Patronus looked weak. It must have changed," Harry explained.

"A Patronus might change if the person suffers a great loss," Remus said uncertainty. "Did you see what it was?"

"It looked like a big dog," Harry said. "Do you think that it changed because of Sirius?"

"Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley called, "Come and help me set the table."

Harry looked to the werewolf.

"You better go," the man said.

Harry complied, noting he never received an answer to his question. He didn't get a chance to ask Remus again as the werewolf spent much of the evening discussing the pranks they have pulled off during their respective school careers.
"Oi you lot," Fred said barging into Ron's attic bedroom early Christmas morning.

Harry had his wand drawn despite not having his glasses on. He wouldn't want to know what Snape or Moody might have to say about such an action. He could almost hear Moody in his head say, “Your wand would do you little good if seeing multiple copies of your opponent and shot a spell three feet off to the left of the real enemy.”

"It's just us," George said silently Disarming Harry.

"Wats goin' on," Ron grumbled as his bright orange covers were pulled off his slumbering form.

"We need your help," Fred answered.

"Wih wah," Ron said stretching his arms over his head.

His glasses now on, Harry could see that it was still dark outside. A light snow was falling on the Burrow. It was the perfect Christmas morning, Harry just wished he had been able to get a few more hours sleep. They had stayed up late the night before. The twins had slipped a little something into Mrs. Weasley's eggnog and she had entertained everyone (with maybe the exception of Fluer) with tales of her Christmases with Mr. Weasley before their children were born, or were too young for most of them to remember.

"What do you need help with," Harry asked sticking his wand into the waistband of his pajamas.

"Cooking breakfast," Fred supplied.

"Breakfast," Ron said dumbly.

"We manage on our own," George explained, "but we've never done something this big on our own. Unless you all want beans on toast, we need help."

Harry pulled on his slippers. "Is it just me you got up?"

"I'm up too," Ron said through another loud yawn.

"Quiet," Fred hissed. "We don't want to wake Mum."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"Are you really that stupid?" George asked rhetorically, "It's a surprise, git."

"Dad's not here but we thought we could make her breakfast," Fred said.

"Except you don't know how to make breakfast," Harry supplied.

"I know how to make a wonderful bowl of porridge," George said sounding greatly offended.

Harry snorted as he led the small group of young men downstairs. He set to work having the other boys find him everything he would need. Aunt Petunia would be horrified to see the state of the kitchen as he prepared the works. The other could deal with the dishes when he was done.
Weasleys slowly began to drift downstairs drawn by the smells of freshly brewed coffee and bacon. Bill and Charlie had set the table saving a spot for their mother at the head of the table. Harry was certain the girls must have kept Mrs. Weasley busy upstairs until everything was ready. There was no way she didn’t smell the food, or hear the occasional curse as the magical ranger reacted in a way he wasn’t used to.

"What's all this," Mrs. Weasley demanded finally coming into the kitchen.

"Merry Christmas," Harry said shyly.

"We know we're not Dad, but we wanted to make you breakfast," Bill said stepping up.

Mrs. Weasley broke into tears, hugging each of her children in turn.

"Did you cook everything, Harry love?" She asked when she reached him.

Harry nodded. She pulled him into a fierce hug.

"Thank you," she kissed the top of his head.

Harry smiled, blushing slightly.

"Let's tuck in before it goes cold," Fred advised, not that it was a real concern with dishes charmed to keep things warm.

Harry's wonderful hearty breakfast was followed by present opening. Harry received another large cache of products from the twins. He had barely made a dent in the last box they had given him, with the exception of the sugar quills, those were almost gone. Luna had sent him something he had no clue as to what it could be. Neville had warned them he would bring their presents with them when he saw them after Boxing Day. Harry pulled on his new sweater (red with the Gryffindor lion across the chest). He noticed Fleur was the only one not wearing a sweater. It appeared, that Mrs. Weasley failed to make her one.

Mrs. Weasley broke down once more when one of Celestina Warbeck's songs came over the radio. It turned out, it was the song she and Mr. Weasley had danced to on their first real date.

With emotions running high a great snowball fight was organized to help relieve much of the overwhelming feelings of the day. Mrs. Weasley chose not to participate. Instead, she began working on the feast that was to be Christmas dinner. Fleur too stayed inside not wanting to be part of such a childish activity.

The fight lasted what felt like hours. Fred and George teamed with Harry, Hermione, and Charlie. Bill lead his team of Remus, Ginny, Percy, and Ron to a stellar defeat. The battered and frozen clan wandered their half-frozen bodies into the house warming themselves by the fire, talking softly over games of chess and Exploring Snap. Ginny fell asleep leaning on Charlie's shoulder as she attempted to read her book.

The wards sounded the arrival of a new visitor to the Burrow around the time Harry was considering second helpings of turkey at dinner.

"Who's that?" Charlie asked.

"That's the Minister," Percy said standing up. He ran a nervous hand down his rumpled Christmas sweater and trousers.
"What's he doing here?" demanded Fred.

Percy was on his feet welcoming the Minister of Magic into the Burrow.

"Hello all," Minister Scrimgeour greeted them all. "Mrs. Weasley, on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I would like to thank Arnold's many years of dedicated service," Scrimgeour began.

George gave a disapproving snort at the comment. It was covered by the heated whispers of the others at the table. Mr. Weasley had worked for the Ministry for well over twenty years, and still, they failed to acknowledge him properly now.

"I came by to present you this," Scrimgeour removed something from the cloak pocket. "This is long overdue, an Order of Merlin second class."

Mrs. Weasley took the package from the Minister with trembling fingers. She ran a finger over the cold metal circle adorned with ancient ruins, attached to a green and purple ribbon. "Thank you, Minister," she said her voice thick with emotion.

"I didn't mean to intrude on this special day, I just wished to convey the thanks of the grateful Ministry. Ah, you young man, you're finished with your dinner, might you show me where Arnold lays."

Harry looked to Remus who shook his head.

"Go with the Minister," Mrs. Weasley encouraged once again running a finger over the small metal circle once again.

Harry followed the large man back out into the garden. The Minister walked with a slight limp, the teen noticed as they walked along the garden wall in silence.

"You didn't come here to thank the Weasleys for their sacrifice," Harry accused breaking the heavy silence.

"No," Scrimgeour confessed. "I wanted to speak to you, Harry."

Harry watched as a garden gnome dug trying to get a worm just below the frozen soil.

"Odd creatures," Scrimgeour said noting what Harry was watching.

Harry shrugged. "Mr. Weasley always thought they were funny. It's why he never tried too hard to get rid of them."

"Harry," Scrimgeour said getting the boy's attention once more.

"I came here in the hopes you would help me."

"With what?" Harry asked.

"The public has doubts in the Ministry, they worry we are not doing a good enough job fighting You-Know-Who," Scrimgeour explained. "If you were to speak up, give them some confidence in what the Ministry is doing."

"The same people accused me of a year of being a liar." Harry held up his hand, "I have this thanks to the Ministry." The stark white words "I shall not tell lies" practically glowing on his cold flesh. If the Ministry had listened to what I had to say and that He was back, I might still have a godfather." Harry replied.
"I am not saying mistakes were not made," Scrimgeour relented.

Harry scoffed.

"I don't suppose you'd tell me where Dumbledore goes once he's left the castle," Scrimgeour tried.

Harry shook his head. "Even if I did know, I wouldn't tell you. I wouldn't trust the Ministry with two knuts let alone a secret."

"Cornelius said you were Dumbledore man through and through," Scrimgeour said, "I see now what he means."

Harry nodded. "At least Dumbledore would have the presence of mind to know Mr. Weasley's name was Arthur, not Arnold."

Harry left the stunned ex-Auror and current head of the wizarding government standing in the gently falling snow beside Mr. Weasley's white tombstone.

"What was that all about," George asked as Harry came in brushing the snow from his shoulders.

"Where's the Minister?" Percy asked.

Harry motioned vaguely back outside, the direction to the orchard and Mr. Weasley final resting place. Percy pulled on his cloak and went in search of their unexpected guest. Harry left the others sitting at the table, moving back to the living room.

"Are you alright?" Remus asked following the boy into the room.

Harry shrugged.

"What did the Minister want?" Remus asked. He carefully watched the motions of the agitated teen.

Harry let out a mirthless laugh, "For me to tell everyone what a great job the Ministry is doing, that there's no reason to worry."

"What did you say?"

Harry held up his hand, "I have the Ministry to thank for this, if they listened to me, Sirius would maybe be alive, that Dumbledore would at least get the names of the dead they are supposedly honoring right."

"How did the Minister take that?" Remus asked, there was a humorous lilt to his voice that had not been there a moment ago.

Harry shrugged, "I don't know, I just left him there."

Remus laughed, his first real laugh, Harry had heard since Sirius' death. "Lily would be proud to call you her own. She would have done much the same."

Harry was sad to say goodbye to Remus a few short hours later. Hermione and Neville arrived in the next several days. Harry informed them together of his encounter with Minister Scrimgeour. There was a mixture of horror and respect on their faces. The rest of the holiday was a blur as they all tried not to upset Mrs. Weasley. The departure of her oldest children back to their far flung jobs and youngest back to Hogwarts made her delicate temperament even more touchy.
All of them took turns using the fireplace at the Burrow to return the way they came. Each was given a firm hug and a kiss before they were allowed to leave. Harry tumbled out of the fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office last.

"Do you want to go see Hagrid with us?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head, "There's a book I need for my Defense assignment."

"Harry," Hermione chastised, "you said you finished that before the break."

Harry shrugged, "I meant to, then..."

Hermione shook her head.

"We'll tell Hagrid you say hi," Neville offered.

"Thanks," Harry said with a grin.

Harry took the stairs two at a time making to the library only five minutes before it closed. Successful in his search Harry came out with his book.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Professor Snape snapped as Harry came around the corner.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"You were running in the corridor," Snape explained.

Harry looked at the man in disbelief. Every student in the castle had done the same thing at some point. Harry couldn't remember a single a professor had taken points for it.

"I needed a book," Harry explained.

"That prevents you from walking in a civilized manner?" Snape asked.

"What'd I do now?" Harry demanded.

Snape raised a dangerous eyebrow at the question.

"You're only ever like this when I've done something particularly stupid," Harry said crossing his arms over his chest.

"I can't have done anything yet, I just got back to the castle."

"Mind your tone, Potter, or should I make it another ten?" Snape asked.

Harry did not respond.

"You do not think your encounter with the Minister of Magic deserves some form of rebuke?" Snape asked.

Harry frowned. "How do you know about that?"

"You may not be surprised to learn you are the frequent topic of discussion at Order meetings," Snape informed him.

"What does that matter?" Harry asked.
"Do you think it wise to make your ambivalence toward the Minister of Magic and what he represents so well known?" Snape asked.

"What? I should tell everyone what a great job they're doing?" Harry asked.

"I did not say that, Potter. However, it could be beneficial to have the aide of the Ministry at some time in the future."

Harry deflated, "Then what should have I said?"

"You could have taken the matter under consideration," Snape suggested.

Harry nodded, "Yes sir."

"What did the Ministry request of you?" Snape asked.

Harry sighed, "Like I said, to tell everyone what a good job they're doing, where Professor Dumbledore goes when he's left Hogwarts. I told him I didn't trust him. There's no way I would be able to know that information would stay out of the hands of Death Eaters."

"You may have more sense than I give you credit for, Harry. However, that does not mean you should your trust to all those you believe deserve it." Snape said.

Harry frowned once again, "I don't understand."

"Often times, there is much more going on then you are willing to believe or understand. We are merely pawns in a game of chess we do not control and whose rules are ever changing." Snape explained.

"So you think I should trust Scrimgeour?" Harry asked.

"I would have it so you were to consider all your relationships with the ferocity that you chase a Snitch on the Quidditch pitch," Snape answered. "You may find there is more there than you wish to believe."

Harry left the man more confused than ever. Who was he trusting he shouldn't?

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Classes started once again on Monday, Quidditch on Tuesday. The upcoming match against Hufflepuff was to be played at the end of February. Harry hoped the rest over the holidays renewed their drive to win the cup. On his way to his first practice, Jimmy Perkins handed Harry a scroll written in a familiar tilting script. His next lesson would be in two nights.

Like all the others, this one included a trip into the Pensieve. This time Tom was older a teenager, just out of Hogwarts. He was working in Borgin and Burkes as a shop assistant. The man had sold Tom's mother's necklace to a very fat and wealthy woman Hepsiba Smith, a woman who claimed to a direct descendant of Helga Hufflepuff. She owned not only the necklace that had once been Slytherin's but a gold cup of Hufflepuff. When she died, supposedly by accidentally being poisoned by her elderly house elf both items were mysteriously missing.

Dumbledore promised this obsession with the founders of Hogwarts and their belongings would be
important later down the road. They viewed another memory too, featuring a sixteen or seventeen-
year-old Tom talking with a much younger Slughorn. Tom wanted to know about Horcruxes. The
memory at this point became hazed a blurry version of Slughorn yelling about not knowing anything
about the matter.

Dumbledore explained the haziness of the memory was because it was tampered with. He charged
Harry with the task of retrieving the unaltered memory from Slughorn.

Getting the memory was much harder than Harry anticipated. It was not simply a matter of walking
up the man and asking for it in (his first unsuccessful attempt). Afterward, the man did his best to
avoid any chance Harry could possibly get him alone. There were no meetings of the Slug Club and
the professor refused to speak to him in class.

Harry almost to the point he was going to ask Professor Snape what he should do when an
opportunity presented itself. He had a chance to discuss the matter with the professor when Ron ate a
package of cauldron cakes spiked with love potion of one of the girls gave Harry at Christmas
thinking they were a birthday present for him. Ron had instantly become obsessed with the maker,
Romilda Vane. Harry had taken Ron to Slughorn for an antidote to the potion. Ron recovered
everything but his dignity.

The trouble came when Slughorn had offered them both a glass of port as a birthday toast. Ron had
been the only one to drink and had nearly be poisoned to death. If Harry had not shoved a bezoar
down his throat, he would have died. Harry didn't want to think about how Mrs. Weasley would
react to the loss of one of her children and not so horribly long after Mr. Weasley.
Ron's recovery was not a fast one. He spent weeks in the Hospital Wing. This forced Harry let his
second choice for Keeper play in the match against Hufflepuff. How the game went exactly, Harry
would never know as he was knocked out by McLaggen who was attempting to show Perkins how
to use his bat properly verse guarding the hoops against the opposing team.

Harry sincerely hoped by the time of his next match his team would be back to one hundred percent.
He had no desire to let Professor McGonagall down having to hand over the Quidditch Cup to
someone else, heaven forbid, to the Slytherins. As winter came to a close, the horrible match and
those trivial worries were driven away by something far more serious.
“Good evening Harry,” Dumbledore greeted the teen as they gathered a few days after Harry’s release from the Hospital Wing and Gryffindor’s horrific lost to Hufflepuff. Many laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of Cormac McLaggen.

“Hello sir,” Harry said taking his usual seat.

“I trust Madam Pomfrey has restored you to top form,” Dumbledore said surveying the boy over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“Yes sir, thank you,” Harry confirmed.

“Now, may I ask, what success have you had in obtaining the memory I requested at the end of our last lesson,” Dumbledore inquired.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Harry said crestfallen. “I haven’t gotten it yet.”

“I understand your mind has been…occupied with recent events,” Dumbledore said.

Harry shook his head, “I should have tried harder. I’ll do better.”

“After tonight, there will be no reason to meet until you are successful,” Dumbledore explained.

Harry nodded. “I’ll get it as soon as I can.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Until then, there is only one more memory I have to share with you.”

“Whose is it this time?” Harry asked, his curiosity peaked.

“My own,” Dumbledore said removing a vial from his sleeve. “This happened a number of years after the last time we encountered Tom. I was recently made headmaster after the retirement of Professor Dippet. In this time, Voldemort had begun to make a name for himself starting to draw others behind his beliefs.” The man used his wand to remove the cork from the vial tipping into the stone basin.

Harry followed his mentor into the memory. Dumbledore sat in his office, much unchanged from the present day. The lamps were lit on a stormy night as Tom Riddle entered the room. He was no longer the attractive young man they had seen in previous memories. His dark eyes had taken on a reddish hue, his once full head of dark hair gone thin, his young attractive face, skeletal.

Riddle had made the trip to Hogwarts to request a teaching position at the school, the Defense the Dark Arts position that was opening at the end of the year. Dumbledore refused to grant it, not for his age, as he had done when the young man requested it just after graduation. No, this was that Dumbledore feared why the young man wanted to take the teaching job. It was known at the school the man’s opinion of who should be part of the magical community. Dumbledore had dismissed the disappointed Riddle into the night. Since then, the Defense professor never lasted more than a year.

Harry and the headmaster discussed how similar Harry and Voldemort were to one another. Both
were Half-Blood orphans raised in unhappy circumstances. Neither learned of magic, nor their possession of it until they received their letters from Hogwarts. Dumbledore surmised it was Harry’s blood status that drove Voldemort to select Harry to be the chosen victim of the prophecy, not Neville. The other similarities were the circumstance of his selection and only strengthened the connection between the two.

Harry noticed that Malfoy was coming down the hall from the Room of Requirements as he walked back to Gryffindor Tower from the Headmaster’s office. He had taken to trying to discover what Malfoy was up to, so far with little success. No matter what he requested of the room it refused to appear for him.

It was late by the time he arrived back to the Common Room, only Neville and Hermione were in the room waiting for him to return.

“Kreacher,” Harry called.

The snort-nosed house elf appeared in front of Harry. His bulbous eyes glared at his master, “Master is calling Kreacher,” the elf growled.

“I need you to follow Malfoy,” Harry clarified for good measure, “Draco Malfoy. I want to know where he goes, what he’s doing, everything.”

“How long is you wanting Kreacher to follow,” the elf asked.

“You can come and tell me in a few days,” Harry answered. “Kreacher, only come back if only us left in the Common Room. I mean if it’s me, Hermione, and Neville.” The boy wanted to make sure there were as few loopholes in his instructions as possible. He would not have the elf betray him worse than what he had done to Sirius.

“Harry is that really necessary,” Hermione asked watching the interaction.

“Go Kreacher,” Harry ordered. The elf disappeared before Harry replied to his friend’s question.

“Nobody else is taking this seriously. I want to know what Malfoy is doing. If he’s under the orders of You-Know-Who, it can’t be good.”

“How do you know he’s under His orders,” Neville asked.

“I told you what I heard him talking about with Snape, who else could he mean? You saw Borgin’s reaction to his arm. He has to have the Mark.” Harry insisted. “I don’t understand why nobody else is worried about him.”

“Dumbledore knows what he’s doing,” Neville reassured, unsuccessfully.

“We’ll see,” Harry asserted.

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Harry sat with his copy of Advanced Potion-Making open as they were supposedly reviewing for working on their essays for Monday. He had spent most of the time playing with Luna’s hair or looking in the margins of his book noting some of the ingenious spells written there. One, “Sectumsempra”, was marked ‘for enemies’. Harry did not dare try it here, not in front of Hermione. She had made clear her disapproval of the Half-Blood Prince. If Harry used any of his privacy
charms such as Muffliato, she would refuse to speak until Harry canceled the spell.

“How am I supposed to get this memory from Slughorn?” Harry grumbled. “The man barely speaks to me anymore. I thought maybe after the whole Ron incident…”

“Have you asked Professor Snape for help,” asked Hermione.

Harry shook his head, “I don’t think he would approve of me demanding this sort of thing from a professor.”

“I didn’t think Snape likes Slughorn,” Neville objected.

“Really?” asked Harry.

Neville nodded. “He’s always glaring at him down the table. You’ve never noticed.”

Harry shook his head. How had he missed that? Snape and Moody would be sorely disappointed in him. Though, Harry wondered what the elderly man had done to gain such disapproval.

“What you need is a dash of luck,” Luna said airily as she twisted a lock of blonde hair around her wand.

“What did you say,” Harry asked.

“You need a little luck,” Luna repeated.

“Luck… Liquid Luck… I can use the Felix Felicis!” Harry said excitedly. In his exuberance, he jostled Luna’s head off his knee. It hit the ground with a soft thump. The blonde sat up, rubbing softly at the back of her head.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said noticing the action, placing a kiss on the sore spot.

Luna smiled at him completely unphased.

“Do you think it will work?” Neville asked, more uncertain of this plan than any other.

“What does it hurt to try?” Hermione said looking at Harry. “When do you want to try?”

Harry shrugged uncertainly. Hagrid’s huge shadow fell over the assembled group. The half giant’s face was streaked with tears, his eyes red rimmed.

“What’s wrong,” Ginny demanded, patting the man’s huge arm.

“Aragog’s died,” Hagrid snuffled.

“Hagrid, we’re so sorry,” “Oh no,” Hermione and Ginny said at the same time. Harry and Neville said nothing. They were the only two that had actually met the giant spider while he was alive and were not sorry to hear of his passing.

“I’m to bury him tonight,” Hagrid explained. “I know it’s askin’ a lot… do yeh think… you could come… sneak out under yer dad’s old cloak?”

Harry chewed his lip. He wasn’t sure how to answer that question.

“We’ll do our best,” Hermione reassured.
“I know it’ll be hard with all the new security measures,” Hagrid said almost smiling at the chance they would risk so much for him.

“You’re really going to go?” Neville asked once Hagrid was well out of earshot.

“No, but I couldn’t tell him that,” Hermione said.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Luna observed. “It is much kinder to tell the person the truth.”

“Luna,” Neville pleaded with her to understand. “Sometimes it is nicer to not tell somebody the complete truth. I don’t think Hagrid to hear me say, ‘I don’t want to come because your pet almost let his family eat me and Harry while we were trying to save you from Azkaban.’”

“It hurts more when hard truths come out,” Luna replied. “We should have told him that we wouldn’t be able to get past the new security measures.”

Harry shook his head. “He wouldn’t have believed us. He knows that I have the map and my dad’s cloak. We can get practically anywhere in the castle with the two of those, day or night.”

“Luna had a point, we could have easily told him the truth,” Hermione sighed.

“You were the one who told him we would try and come,” Harry protested.

“I know,” Hermione sighed. “I just didn’t want to hurt his feeling any more than we have already. It’s been ages since our last visit.”

“We’ve been busy,” Neville reminded her. “Harry’s off with Quidditch and his lessons with Dumbledore, you’ve been buried in your books with everything he’s learning from his lessons, and Professor Sprout has me working in three different greenhouses four nights a week.”

“I know,” Hermione lamented. “I just feel like we should be doing more.”

Neville shook his head. Harry could almost laugh. Neville was always the most positive of the group, the one to find a cloud in every silver lining. He was the most concerned with making sure that they didn’t cause too much trouble and didn’t hurt too many feelings along the way. Here he was explaining the reason why it was better that they behaved in such a contrary manner.

“We’ll do what we can,” Harry promised his guilt riddled friend.

“Have you made up your mind on when to take the Felix?” Hermione asked over dinner several hours later.

Harry nodded, “Tonight. I won’t take all of it, just a sip, give myself a few hours. That way, I’ll more if this time it doesn’t work.”

Hermione nodded in approval. A little over an hour later Hermione and Neville watched as Harry dug the vial of golden liquid out of the bottom of his trunk. He broke the red wax seal taking a small sip of it.

The Felix was unlike anything he had ever consumed it didn’t have the foul taste he associated with all the other ones he had ever taken. As it took effect, he felt lighter, like a huge weight was taken off of his shoulders. His shoulders fell back as a new sense of easy took over. There was nothing to worry about.

“I’m going to go see Hagrid,” Harry informed his friends.
“What!” Demanded Hermione and Neville together.

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed. “I feel it’s the right thing to do.” When the boy rose and headed out of the room without grabbing the Marauder’s Map or his Invisibility Cloak. Hermione followed after him.

“Aren’t you going to take these,” she asked holding them out to him.

Harry shook his head. “I won’t need them.”

“Harry, this doesn’t seem like a very good idea,” Neville warned.

“Don’t worry Neville,” Harry reassured, “I have Felix on my side.”

“Harry,” Hermione begged.

The teen sighed taking the offered items, slipping on the cloak. He disappeared out the portrait hole accidentally knocking over McLaggen. By the time the boy was on his feet again, and his possession recollected and put in his bag, the Fat Lady had disappeared from the frame. Harry chuckled to himself as the other boy cursed at being locked out.

It was a wonderful spring night so Harry decided to detour down by the greenhouses. It was too warm to be under the cloak so he pulled it off enjoying the light breeze. It was still almost an hour before curfew so no professor could object to him being out, walking the grounds. As he passed Greenhouse Two Harry spotted an unexpected, but a pleasantly surprising outline.

“Thank you so much Pomona,” Slughorn said a large collection of cuttings in his head.

“Hello Professor,” Harry greeted coming up behind the man.

“Oh Harry, I didn’t see you there boy,” Slughorn said almost dropping his cuttings. “What are you doing out at this time of day?”

“I’m off to see Hagrid, his pet Argog, this giant spider died. He’s had him for years and he just died. I thought I would go and be with him for the burial.”

“I had heard rumor there were acromantulas in this forest,” Slughorn said more to himself.

“There you are much like your mother Harry,” Slughorn observed.

“I have her eyes I know,” Harry agreed.
Slughorn nodded, “Her eyes. Lily such a lovely young woman. I was thought she would marry Severus. A much better match for their blood statuses.” Slughorn took another long drink.

“Then there was that horrible ‘Mudblood’ incident in their fifth year. He was never able to recover from that.” He shook his head sadly.

“What incident,” Harry asked.

“Severus called Lily ‘Mudblood’ in front of the whole school shortly after their Defense OWL,” Slughorn explained.

Harry frowned. Nobody had ever told him about this happening.

“Severus tried and tried to apologize,” Slughorn continued. “No matter what he did, Lily never spoke to him again.”

Harry’s mind reeled with this new information. Snape always made it sound like he and Harry’s mother were friends until she died, or at least until they went into hiding. Now, he was being told Snape hadn’t spoken to his mother since their fifth year. Slughorn’s head began to lull to his chest.

“Professor,” Harry said cautiously. He could feel that the effects of the potion were starting to wear off, if he didn’t get it soon he never would.

“What is it lad,” Slughorn slurred.

“I need that memory,” Harry stated firmly.

“Don’t ask me for that,” Slughorn begged. “You can’t ask me for that. There’s nothing to see there, just an old man’s failings.”

“Professor, there is something I need to know.” Harry insisted. “Do it for my mother. You said she was one of your favorite students. Did you know my mother died to save me?” The old man was weeping openly at this point but Harry continued nonetheless. “Voldemort gave her the chance to step aside. She didn’t have to die. She gave up her life to save mine.”

Slughorn placed his wand to his temple, he removed a long silver strand of memory putting it in a vial he withdrew from one of his many pockets. “Try and forgive me, I never wished for this to happen.” His head fell onto the scrubbed wooden table letting out a loud snore.

Harry grabbed the vial. He ran the entire way to Dumbledore’s office anxious to learn what his success might mean.

Harry didn’t wait for the spiral staircase to carry him to the door of the office. He ran up the last half, two at a time. He threw open the door of the office. Dumbledore didn’t look all that surprised to see the teen.

“Good evening Harry,” Dumbledore greeted setting aside his quill.

“I have it, sir,” Harry said catching his breath. “I’ve got Slughorn’s memory, just now.”

Dumbledore motioned for Harry to come to the desk. Harry extended the vial to man as he pulled the familiar stone basin in the center of the desk. Harry dived in first.

The setting was almost exactly the same as the last time they had viewed Slughorn’s memory. It was missing the glossy feeling that appeared in the altered version, however. Dumbledore appeared an
instant later. They watched together as Slughorn explained to the teenage Tom Riddle what a Horcrux was and what must be done to create them. It was Tom’s question of the significance of making seven that seemed to make Slughorn uncomfortable.

“Do you think that number is important?” Harry asked as they resumed their usual places at memory’s end.

“Indeed,” confirmed the professor. “We already know that he was able to achieve his goal in a Horcrux more than once.”

“Really,” Harry asked.

“Of course, my dear boy,” Dumbledore said lightly. “You discovered and destroyed one already.”

Harry frowned.

“The Tom Riddle you described encountering down in the Chamber of Secrets. He was not a ghost or a mere shadow of a memory. The sixteen-year-old Tom had put a piece of his soul into that diary. That was how he was able to possess Miss Weasley.” Dumbledore explained. “After your encounter in the Chamber, I began to suspect that there might be others.”

Harry sighed. “They could be anything or anywhere. We don’t even know how many.”

“You are forgetting all we have seen, Harry,” Dumbledore said softly. “Remember the first time I met with the child. He kept treasures from particularly cruel or violent incidents.”

Harry nodded. “So, you think that the Horcruxes will be based on similar attacks. The worse murders he’s committed?”

“That would be a logical conclusion.” Dumbledore agreed.

Harry sighed, “Then there was his obsession with the Founders of Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore ran his good hand down his beard. “We know of three belongings that are supposed to have been in the possession of these individuals.”

“The necklace, the ring, and the cup,” Harry said ticking them off on his fingers.

“Yes,” agreed Dumbledore, “add this to the diary brings us to four.”

“What else could there be?” Harry asked.

“Have you ever considered the relationship between Voldemort and his familiar Nagini?” Dumbledore inquired.

Harry shook his head.

“It is closer than any normal sort of pet and master. He seems to have an unusual amount of control over it. It was his connection with the snake that let you see the images of the corridor in the Ministry of Magic last year.”

“The snake makes five,” Harry adding it to the count on his fingers.

“There is the bit of Voldemort that escaped without a body, barely alive, a parasitic force until he was able to construct a new body in the graveyard of Little Hangleton.”
“That’s only six,” Harry said ticking them off.

“For the last, we must guess,” Dumbledore informed him. “We know he was successful in acquiring items that belonged to Hufflepuff and Slytherin. We can assume would try to do the same for the remaining two Founders Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor.”

“Is there anything people know that people to either of them?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore cast his eyes to the self behind his desk, there stood the gleaming sword Harry had drawn out of the Sorting Hat in the Chamber of Secrets. “Both the Sorting Hat and the sword once belonged to the founder of your house.”

“You don’t think the Sorting Hat could be one?” Harry asked.

“No,” Dumbledore said adamantly. “Voldemort could not have befouled the Sorting Hat as he was never alone with it either as a student or after.”

Harry still looked uncertain.

“I assure you, Harry, I have checked it thoroughly,” Dumbledore reassured.

“And the sword,” Harry asked.

“Was considered lost to the ages until you removed it from that Sorting Hat nearly four years ago.”

“That means we need to find something of Ravenclaw’s,” Harry suggested.

Dumbledore nodded.

“Do we have any idea where they might be?” Harry asked.

“That is where I have been going when I have left the castle, researching the location of possible Horcruxes,” Dumbledore confided. “I believe I may know the location of one.”

“Can I go with you the next time you leave?” asked Harry.

“Do you wish to? It will likely be very dangerous,” Dumbledore warned.

“I’m going to have to be the one who kills him,” Harry insisted. “I should be able to help find the missing parts of his soul.”

“Indeed,” agreed Dumbledore. “It is only when all the pieces of the Voldemort’s soul are destroyed that that he will be truly able to die, gone forever.”

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Kreacher appeared in the Gryffindor Common Room in the early hours of the Friday morning as Harry tried to figure out how to write the essay for Snape on the use of nonverbal spells in dueling. Harry looked up surprised as there was a second crack of Apparition. Dobby launched himself at Kreacher. The older elf blocked his face as Dobby’s fists came showering down on his huge nose.

“Dobby, Kreacher, stop it,” Harry demanded.
Dobby froze instantly, his fist held in midair.

“What in the name of Merlin is going on,” Harry demanded.

“Kreacher is here to report the movements of the Malfoy heir like master requested of Kreacher,” the elf said glaring at the teenager.

“What about you, Dobby,” Harry asked.

“Dobby is wanting to help Harry Potter too sir,” Dobby explained. “Dobby heard Kreacher saying was to follow Draco Malfoy and Dobby thought he could help, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is not sleeping for four days, Harry Potter.”

“What did you find out?” He asked not caring with elf answered.

“The Malfoy heir takes his meals in the Great Hall, he attends his classes, he spends his time in the Slytherin Common Room, he does his homework…” Kreacher listed off. “He is a most worthy heir to the noble house of Malfoy.”

Dobby disagreed, “Draco is a bad boy,” the elf all but yelled at Kreacher. “The Malfoys is being bad wizards and bads to house elves.”

Kreacher growled at the younger elf.

“Did he ever go up the Room of Requirements?” Harry asked ignoring the glares the elves were shooting at one another?

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby confirmed.

“Do you have any idea what he’s doing in there?”

Dobby’s green eyes shot to the ground, “No, Harry Potter, Dobby is not being able to follow him in.”

Harry sighed, “Okay, thank you for trying.”

“Is you wanting us to follow Draco still?” Dobby asked.

Harry frowned, “No…” Then he changed his mind… “Tell me the next he goes into the Room of Requirements.”

The elves nodded in understanding.

“Make sure you eat and sleep too,” Harry added. “I don’t want you being hurt because of Malfoy.”

The elves disappeared in matching cracks of Apparition. Harry hoped Dobby’s first stop was a bed. The little elf shouldn’t make himself sick trying to assist Harry in following Malfoy. It wasn’t even Dobby that he had set the task to. It was probably good the elf volunteered. He told him much more than Kreacher had.

“Harry Potter sir,” Dobby said appearing in front of Harry in the hallway in front of the Charms corridor. “Draco is in the Comes and Goes Room.” His message delivered the elf disappeared once more.

“Where are you going,” Hermione demanded as Harry ran down the hall.
Harry ignored the protests of his friends as he ran down the hall to see if he could catch Malfoy in there. Who he didn’t expect to see there was Professor Trelawney on the floor, her many shawls over her head, a bag of glass sherry bottles rattled at her feet.

“Professor,” Harry said running over, helping her to her feet. “Are you alright?”

“In all my years, of using that room…It’s never…” Trelawney said looking at the door confused.

“What happened Professor?” Harry asked.

“It threw me out,” Trelawney said getting to her feet with Harry’s assistance.

“The Room of Requirements threw you out?” Harry repeated.

“There was a voice, It wished to know who it was. The next thing I knew I was being unceremoniously thrown out of the room head first,” Trelawney explained.

“The voice, did you know it?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Never heard it in my life,” Trelawney said firmly.

Harry sighed.

“I have never felt so disrespect. Not even when I was so rudely interrupted during my interview for my current position,” Trelawney lamented.

“Sorry, what was that, Professor,” Harry said, studying the door to the room once more. He could feel the irritation coming from the professor, so he turned his attention back to her.

“My first interview with Dumbledore, some seventeen years ago,” Trelawney explained. “I must say he was rather impressed with me, coming from one who seemed to express a great amount of skepticism for the subject at the beginning of the interview. We were interrupted by none other than Severus Snape, who too was looking for a position at Hogwarts. I can only conclude he was hoping to receive tips listening at the keyhole.”

“Professor Snape was interrupted your interview?” Harry asked dumbfounded.

“It was the barman of the Hogshead truly, such an odd man, always smells of goats,” Trelawney corrected. “He brought Snape to Dumbledore as if to show him the young man’s true character.” Trelawney’s brows furrowed in concern. “Are you well, Potter? You look a little green.”

Harry shook his head.

“Let’s take you to the Hospital Wing,” Trelawney said nervously.

Harry shook his head again. “That’s alright, Professor. I’m just going to go have a lie down in back in the Tower.”

She didn’t look that convinced. Harry didn’t care. He drifted upstairs replaying the conversation over and over in his mind. He wandered up to the Tower and his room, eventually. Pulling the curtains around his bed tightly shut. Playing it over in his mind over and over again.

Professor Snape had was the one to overhear the prophecy. The “foolish young man” that’s how he thought of himself? Snape hadn’t spoken to his mother since their fifth year after he called her ‘Mudblood’. The man had been a Death Eater. Had he known that Lily, his friend once upon a time, her son could have been the one mentioned in the prophecy? Did he care about Harry at all? Why
was he doing what he did now? Was this all a way to make it up to Lily? Did he feel any sort of guilt for his actions? How much of the prophecy had he heard and told Voldemort?

“Harry,” Neville asked.

Harry didn’t know what time it was. How long had he been here?

“Harry,” Neville repeated. “Are you alright?”

Harry moaned.

“What happened to you?” Neville asked pulling the curtains back to see Harry still fully dressed curled in a ball atop his covers.

“He’s a liar. It’s all a lie.” Harry mumbled.

“Who’s a liar?” Neville asked curiously.

“Snape. Everything he’s ever told me. It’s all a lie.” Harry said sitting up.

“What?” Neville said confused.

“It’s Snape’s fault my parents are dead. He was the one that overheard the prophecy. He’s the one that told You-Know-Who what he heard,” Harry explained.

“Are you sure?” Neville asked uncertainly. “Are you sure there isn’t more to the story?”

“He did it,” Harry insisted.

Neville cast his mind around for something, anything that could be of use. “Remember when we thought Sirius was guilty. There was more to the story then. Maybe we just don’t know all the facts.”

“He said it was a ‘foolish young man’ that told Voldemort. That’s how he thinks of himself. He probably doesn’t even care what he did.”

“Are you sure it was him?” Neville tried again.

“Trelawney told me herself,” Harry answered.

Harry and Neville sat there in a heavy silence, both too stunned to speak.

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“Harry are you alright?” Hermione asked him the next morning.

Harry’s eyes were fixed on the year’s Defenses Against the Dark Arts instructor.

“Harry,” Hermione repeated.

Harry turned back to her this time. “What?”

“I asked if you are alright,” Hermione told him.
“I’m fine,” Harry insisted turning back to the head table.

“Are you sure,” Hermione asked following his line of sight.

“Yes,” Harry snapped.

“Did you find out what Malfoy is doing in the Room of Requirements?” Hermione asked.

Harry was drawn back to their own table. He had forgotten about what had drawn him to the seventh floor the previous day by the heaviness of the revelation.

“Did Professor Trelawney see anything when she was in there?” Neville asked.

Harry shook his head. “She didn’t say. She said she had never heard it before.”

“Did she say what she was trying to do,” Hermione asked.

“She had a bag of bottles,” Harry supplied.

Hermione had an odd look on her face in response to the information.

“Why did she mention Professor Snape,” Neville asked.

Harry hadn’t been willing to talk much the night before. Neville had stayed up most of the night to make sure his friend didn’t storm out of the Tower and attack the professor or something of the such.

“What about Professor Snape?” Hermione asked.

“He was the one who overheard the prophecy,” Harry growled.

Hermione breathed in deeply, “Harry, are you sure?”

“It’s what she said,” Harry said as he turned to look up the head table once more. Snape was gone. He sighed and turned back to his breakfast.

“Are you going to ask him about it?” Neville asked.

“Ask him what? Did he know it was my mum?” Harry snapped. “Did he care who it was or was he just doing what Voldemort wanted him to do?”

Neville shrugged uncertainly.

“Harry, there might have been more going on than we know. How many times has there been more information that could have helped us?”

“He told me that it was a ‘foolish young man’, Hermione. He doesn’t think it was that important.” Harry pushed away his plate. “I’m not hungry. I’ll see you in class.”

Harry grabbed his bag. Classes would begin shortly, not that he was sure he could concentrate on the material if he went. He followed his feet drifting through the corridors, yet avoiding the hallways where classes were in session.

His attention was drawn by an unexpected sound, crying. It was coming from a bathroom on the second floor. Harry placed an ear on the boys’ bathroom door. There was nothing. He moved to the girls’.
“Don’t cry,” Moaning Myrtle pleaded.

This was her bathroom, her presence was expected. The voice that spoke next was not…

“He’s going to kill me…He says if I don’t do it soon, he’ll kill me…”

It was a male voice. Harry couldn’t determine whose voice it was, through the obstruction of the door. He pushed it open to see who it was.

Malfy had his back to the door. He held tightly to the sink, hand on either side of the dirty porcelain. His entire frame shook as he sobbed. “I can’t do it…” Malfy sobbed. He froze as he looked up seeing the silent Harry in the doorway. His wand was drawn.

Harry instinctively had his wand in his own hand. Malfy’s curse missed Harry by inches. His bag was ripped from his shoulder its contents spilling across the floor. Harry ducked being a stall door as Malfy sent a Leg-Locking Jinx at Harry. This one hit the door causing it to ricochet off it and smash a toilet water splashed over the floor.

Malfy stepped clearly into Harry’s line of sight, “Crucio” on his lips.

“Sectumsempra!” Harry yelled slashing his wand in Malfy’s direction. The blonde boy collapsed, his face and chest cut as if by an invisible sword. Blood gushed out of the boy onto the tile under him.

Harry collapsed next to the injured boy.

“MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!” Myrtle cried as she fled the room.

Snape threw open the door. Harry stared at the man terrified. The professor ignored his presence as he crouched over the bleeding child. He careful ran his wand over the boy’s face and chest stopping the flow of blood, the counter-curse sounded more like a song than a spell. The wound began to close as the man ran his wand over the flesh a second time. The third time it was completely healed a bright red line all that was left.

“Come now,” Snape said getting Malfy to his feet, “You need the Hospital Wing.” He spoke softly to Malfy, “There will be a degree of scarring, if we act quickly, you take dittany, we might avoid even that.” The pair was at the door when he spoke to Harry for the first time. “Do not even think of leaving.”

Harry sat silently on the floor the mixture of water and blood sinking further into his robes. His forgotten books and homework soaking in the mess. Snape returned ten minutes later.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” Harry blurted out as soon as Snape entered the room.

“Silence!” Snape yelled. His face was contorted in anger. He was more upset than Harry had ever seen him before. “What were you thinking! You used serious Dark Magic! You are lucky Malfy is still alive.”

“You’re one to talk!” Harry yelled back. “You were a bloody Death Eater!”

“Mind your tone, Potter!” Snape warned. “I am a professor at this school. You will treat me with respect. You will tell me where you learned that spell.”

“Whatever,” Harry said rolling his eyes. “You’re a liar. You hadn’t spoken to my mum in years. You called her a Mudblood in front of the whole school.”
The professor’s expression began to slip from anger to horror. He had never told Harry of his and Lily’s falling out, nor its cause.

“You’re a murder,” Harry accused.

Snape stood silently, taken off-guard by the teen’s accusations.

“Some ‘foolish young man,’” told Voldemort about the prophecy. Bollocks! You killed my mum.” Snape fought back the tears that had crept up on him. Harry’s eyes locked with the haunted black eyes of his professor as he said, “You killed my mum the moment you gave that prophecy to Voldemort!” Harry’s anger burning its way into the professor’s mind.

A nine-year-old Snape hid behind bushes watching two girls in the playpark. The younger redhead girl, a young Lily Potter, picked up a flower, the petals opening and closing without her making a motion to do so. She both horrified and fascinated her sister with the action. Snape could contain himself no longer and announced to Lily she was a witch and that he was a wizard. Whatever he was hoping to achieve he failed in his mission. The girls stormed off afraid and insulted.

The scene changed… Severus stood in his new robes in line to be Sorted. He watched as Lily was swiftly placed in Gryffindor joining Sirius. James, Remus, and Peter joined her shortly before Snape was placed into Slytherin. His heart sinking as he walked over to his new table. A tall young man with astounding blonde hair and wearing a prefect’s badge extending a hand to welcome the newest Slytherin.

A new memory… Harry watched as a young James and Sirius ran past Severus knocking the books out of his arms, the two Marauders laughing all the time.

The memory bled into another… Snape sat on the edge of the Black Lake, his nose inches away from a paper held tightly in his hands.

“I’m bored,” complained Sirius.

“You can quiz me on Transfiguration,” Remus said offering the stack of notes. James was playing with a practice Snitch he released it only to catch with the tips of his fingers before it could escape. Spotting Snape he pocketed it. “I’ve got a better idea."

“Oi Snape!” James called getting the other boy’s attention. Snape’s hand dived for his wand it was halfway out when James yelled “Expelliarmus!” Snape’s wand landed some ten feet away with a soft thump. “Impedimenta!” called James and Snape’s movements were halted as if he were bound with a quantity of rope. He fell over curses mixed with ineffective hexes from the wandless boy. James cast a cleaning charm of Snape’s mouth causing the other boy to choke on soap bubbles.
“Leave him ALONE,” demanded Lily as approached the crowd. “What’s he ever done to you?”

James paused as if he were seriously considering the matter. “Done? It’s more a matter of him merely existing.”

“Leave him alone you arrogant toerag,” Lily ordered.

“I’ll leave him alone if you say you’ll go out with me Evans,” James offered.

There was a flash of light and a bloody cut came across James’ face. Snape was armed once again.

“None of that,” James said and then Snape was hanging upside down, his robes over his head, his greying underpants on display for the world to see.

“Let him be,” ordered Lily once more.

“You should be glad Evans was here to save you Snivellus,” James said dropping the boy to the ground once more.

“I don’t need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her,” Snape snapped.

Lily blinked. “Fine,” she snapped, “I won’t bother in the future. And I would wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus.”

The memory changed once again…

Snape stood on the top of a windblown cliff, Dumbledore held his wand pointing at the Death Eater.

“What message does Voldemort have for me?” Dumbledore asked.

“No-No message,” Snape said. “I came of my own volition.”

“What request could a Death Eater have of me?”

“The Dark Lord… He believes the prophecy refers to Lily Evans… He means to hunt them down… Kill them all…”

“If she means so much to you why not request your master to spare her.”

“I have…”

“You disgust me.” Dumbledore seethed.

“You must save her.”

“You care nothing for her husband or child…”

“Hide them all then…” Snape pleaded.

“And what can you give me in return?” Dumbledore asked.

“In-in return?” Snape stumbled. “Anything.”

It was night as Snape ran through the streets of a small village. Harry could see the look of anxiety on the man’s face. The look changed to one of despair as the view of ruined house came into sight. Snape ran faster toward the house, bursting through the open front door. Snape ignored the prone form of James on the floor by the stairs. Snape ran up the stairs continuing down the hall. Lily lay in front of Harry’s crib. The toddler crying as Snape clung to Lily’s lifeless body. A letter with “Sev” written on the front in Lily’s distinctive hand lay on the floor next to Snape.

The memory shifted again…

It was many years later, Snape and Dumbledore were in the headmaster’s office.

Dumbledore was barely conscious.

“You horrible old fool,” Snape said running his wand over the man’s charred hand.

“What were you thinking? You had to have known the ring bore a heavy curse. The best I can do is to contain it.”

Dumbledore watched silently as Snape continued to work on his hand. “How long do I have?”

Snape looked at the blacked flesh, “I have managed to contain it for now. You might have a year, it is hard to say. Spells like this, they tend to grow stronger over time. If
you have called me earlier, I might have been able to buy you longer.”

The memory shifted…

It was late at night Dumbledore sat behind his desk his fingers steepled in front of him.

“You plan to let the boy kill you?” Snape asked woefully.

“No Severus,” Dumbledore said. “It must be you that does it. The boy’s soul must remain undamaged.”

“What about my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?”

“Only you can know if helping an old man avoid pain and humiliation will harm your soul,” said Dumbledore. “Death is coming for me as certain as the Chudley Cannons will finish at the bottom of this year’s Quidditch standings.”

Snape gave a curt nod.

The memory changed once more. They were once again in the headmaster’s office. Snape stood in the center of the room. He looked as if she was going to be sick at any moment.

“There will come at a time when Lord Voldemort fears for the life of his snake.”

“For Nagini?” Snape looked confused.

“Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forward to do his bidding but keeps it safe and close to him, magically protected, I think it will be safe to tell Harry.”

“Tell him what?”

“Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort’s soul, blasted away from the rest attached itself to the only remaining living soul left in the destroyed building. Part of Voldemort soul lives in Harry. That is how he can speak to snakes, the connection that none could understand. As long as that fragment of his soul remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die.”

“So the boy… Harry must die?” asked Snape quietly.

“And Voldemort himself must do it. That is essential.”

After a long pause, Snape said, “I thought…all these years… that we were protecting him for her. For Lily.”

“We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength.”

“I have spied and lied for you. It was all supposed to be to save Lily Potter’s son. Now you tell me you have been raising him as a pig for slaughter.”

“After all this time, Severus? Was it all for Lily?”

Snape withdrew his wand casting “Expecto Patronum!” A gorgeous silver doe landed silently on the floor she gracefully circled the room, before running out one of the high windows, “Always.”

“Have you not grown to care for the boy at all?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes full of
Harry fell back onto the cool tiled floor of the bathroom of the seventh floor’s bathroom. The still blood tinged water soaking into his robes. Tears were running down Snape’s normally stony face as he balanced himself on the edge of a sink behind him.

“What the bloody Hell was that?” Harry demanded.

“Mind your tongue, Potter,” Snape said, his face returned to its normal blank expression. He extended his hand to the boy. Harry took it as was put back on his feet. “Legilimency should never be attempted in such fits of anger, Potter. You have no idea what you might find in the mind of the other.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

Snape took the boy by his upper arm, “This is not the place,” he cast an eye back to Myrtle’s stall, “There is too much of a chance someone could learn of our discussion.”

The man waved his wand over Harry’s bag repairing and gathering the books back to him. He placed the black potions book in his bag last. The man removed the one thing that had not fallen out, Harry’s Invisibility Cloak he handed it to the boy. Harry slipped it on without any further instruction.

Harry followed silently behind the teacher down the halls of the castle. The stopped in front of the painting of the moonlit doe. The man pushed open the painting allowing the boy past him. Nothing had changed here since his last visit. Like back at Spinner’s End there were several framed photographs sitting on the mantle above the fireplace.

“You have questions,” Snape said as he took a seat across from Harry.

“Err…” Harry stumbled.

“Articulate as ever, Potter,” Snape said tersely, “How very like your father.”

“Leave my dad out of this,” Harry ordered.

“I am a professor, Potter. I will be treated with respect.” Snape snapped. “I am willing to answer any questions you have about what you saw in the bathroom. However, I will do deal with your lack of manners.”

Harry nodded. A heavy silence hung between them unsure where to begin.

“Those were all your memories,” Harry asked after a long pause.

“Indeed.”

“Was that the last time you spoke to my mum?” Harry asked uncertainly.

“No,” Snape said rising from his seat. “I spoke to her later that evening. I tried to apologize to Lily. I spent hours waiting outside the entrance to the Gryffindor common room in hopes of gaining your mother’s forgiveness.”

“She didn’t give it to you,” Harry said.
“No, she did not. She believed that I... that I was destined to be a Death Eater... That I was no longer the boy she had befriended in the playpark. My use of the word was the final confirmation of such a matter.”

Harry nodded once again.

“You have no questions about what else you saw? My relationship with Lily conclusion is the most trivial of what you witnessed, Potter.” Snape said as he picked up one of the photographs on the mantle. It was a fifteen or so year old Lily who sat under the shade of a large tree beside a river. Harry recognized the spot from his time in Cokeworth.

“I know,” Harry admitted. “Professor Dumbledore is dying?”

“He is,” Snape said setting the picture down.

“Is that why he’s always gone?” Harry asked.

“I do not know. There are things the headmaster refuses to share with me. You may have a better idea of what the headmaster is doing than I.” Snape said, a frown on his lips.

“The ring, the one with the curse,” Harry said softly, “It was a Horcrux.”

“What was that, Harry?” Snape demanded.

“The ring, the one that turned Dumbledore’s hand black, it was one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes.”

“One of?” Snape said shocked.

Harry nodded. “There are more. The diary that I destroyed in your second year. The ring that Dumbledore broke with Gryffindor’s sword. I guess the snake if Dumbledore thinks that’s why he won’t let it out of his sight. He had a necklace that belonged to Slytherin and a cup of Hufflepuff’s. He might have gotten something of Ravenclaw’s too and…”

“You,” concluded Snape.

“And me…” Harry confirmed.

“The Dark Lord divided his soul into seven pieces,” Snape said no more than a whisper.


“Eight,” Snape agreed.

“I have to die,” Harry said heavily.

“There must be another way,” Snape beginning to pace the room.

Harry shook his head. “No, Dumbledore said ‘As long as the of Voldemort’s soul is in me he can’t die.”

“No,” Snape refused. “The old man can be wrong.”

Harry shook his head again. “It’s the prophecy.

“Damn that prophecy,” Snape snapped.
Undeterred Harry continued, “‘Neither can live while the other survives.’ I have to die so that Horcrux can be destroyed.”

“You are to be the one to vanquish the Dark Lord,” he reminded Harry. “How are you supposed to do that from beyond the veil?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted.

The room falling silent once more. The clocked ticked away several long minutes before Snape broke the silence.

“Where did you learn the spell you used on Malfoy?”

Harry pulled his Potions book from his bag, “It was in here.”

Snape took the book from the teen. He opened the cover of it, his already pale features draining of their remaining color. “Where in the name of Merlin did you get this, Potter?”

“Slughorn,” Harry said defensively. “He lent it to me to use during our first Potions class of the year. I didn’t have a book because I didn’t think I couldn’t take it since I only got an ‘E’ on my OWLs.”

“That was out of sheer laziness,” Snape scoffed.

Harry frowned. “I didn’t study,” the boy said gruffly.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry shrugged, “I was still pretty upset about…about what happened to Sirius….I didn’t really care how I did on my exams. I only sat them because Mrs. Longbottom made me.”

“I must thank her the next time I see her,” Snape said dryly. “That explains the first class, Potter. Why do you have it now?”

“The hints, you know, the instructions in the margins are really useful. You should take a look. The Prince bloke, whoever he was a genius.”

Snape ignored the comment. “You found the spell in one of the margins,” Snape asked in clarification.

“Yeah,” Harry admitted.

“You said in the bathroom that you did not intend that outcome? Did you have any knowledge what that spell might do before you used it against Malfoy?”

Harry shook his head rapidly back and forth, “No sir.”

“Did you not learn your lesson about unknown books in your second year?” Snape asked exasperatedly.

Harry frowned. “What do you mean? I’ve been using the book all year. The book isn’t cursed or dark or anything.”

“Not dark, other’s might disagree,” Snape said setting the book down on the mantle.

“Yeah, Hermione doesn’t like the Prince too much,” Harry agreed. “She thinks he’s pretty dodgy. She won’t talk if we use any of his privacy spells.”
“A Gryffindor with common sense,” Snape mumbled. “Perhaps I should award Gryffindor house points.”

“You haven’t even looked at the spells or the potions. The Prince has helped me loads this year.” Harry protested.

“Stop using that asinine moniker, Potter.” Snape snapped. “I have no need to look at the book. I am fully aware of what’s in it.”

“How?” Harry asked.

“I am the Half-Blood Prince,” Snape said sadly.

Snape sentenced Harry to detention every weekend for the rest of term for his attack on Malfoy. The two of them would spend their time working on Harry’s Occlumency shields and discussing all the headmaster had shared with the teen about Voldemort. Much of the information was new to Snape. The Potion Master was horrified to learn the man planned to take Harry with him the next time he went to look for a Horcrux.

Since he was in detentions on the weekend Harry had to sit out of the Quidditch match. Ginny moved into his place as Seeker, the Chaser spot taken on by Dean Thomas. The team, despite missing Harry was able to synch the Cup with a four-hundred-point win over Ravenclaw.

It was a week after Gryffindor's win when Jimmy Peaks came up to Harry with a scroll wrapped in a purple ribbon.

“What’s that,” Jimmy asked.

“It’s from Dumbledore,” Harry answered absentmindedly, reading the letter.

Jimmy nodded before disappearing to join his friends in the far corner of the common room.

“He’s found one,” Neville squeaked.

Harry nodded. His friends were unaware of what he had learned from Snape. They had no idea Harry was a Horcrux. That the destruction of the one they found tonight if they found one, would bring Harry one step closer to his own death.

“When do you go?” Hermione asked.

Harry scanned down the letter once more. “I’m supposed to meet him at nine in his office.”

Hermione looked at her watch. “That’s only a half an hour for now.”

Harry nodded. He motioned for them to follow him up the stairs. Neville and Hermione did as requested without protest. Once in his room, Harry opened his trunk and removed the vial of the remaining Felix Felicis. “I want you to have this,” he gave it to Hermione.

“Harry,” Hermione protested.

Harry shook his head. “You’ll need it more than me. With Dumbledore out of the castle, who knows what Malfoy will try. You take it, share it with Luna and Ginny. Contact the members of the DA if
you can. Everyone will need to be vigilant.”

Harry pulled the curly haired girl into a tight hug. “Be careful.”

Hermione nodded into his shoulder, “You too.”

“No problem,” Harry promised full of ease he didn’t feel.

Harry extended his hand to Neville. The other boy shook his head. “You’ll be back in a few hours. You’re going with Dumbledore. He’ll bring you back.”

Harry gave his friend a weak smile. “Look after them for me, especially Luna.”

Neville nodded. Harry grabbed his Invisibility Cloak and pulled it on. He walked down the headmaster’s office a heavy filling of unease in his stomach. Dumbledore was ready for him as he entered the office. The two walked down to the village, outside of the school’s wards preventing Apparition. Unseen under his cloak Harry took hold of the old man’s arm. He spun them on his heel. They reappeared many miles away on a windblown cliffside high above a stormy sea. Voldemort and the other children of the orphanage had visited this place during his childhood, Harry remembered from his lessons.

Harry and Dumbledore climbed down the jagged cliff face. The man’s injured hand slowing his descent. When they reached the wave crashed stone at the bottom Harry could see the entrance to a cave that would be filled during high tide. Dumbledore with the ease of a younger man dived in and began to swim the short distance to the cave, his lit wand clutched between his teeth. Harry followed him into the small chamber of the cave.

Dumbledore was running his hands over the rocks tracing the magic to discover the way forward. He must have figured something out as he drew a silver knife and cut his arm, blood splattering the rock. They paused for a moment as Dumbledore healed the wound like Snape had done Malfoy, before walking further into the cave.

The chamber was filled with an eerie green light, emanating from an island at the center. Dumbledore stopped on the bank, drawing up a boat from the depth of the magically skilled waters. Harry was told to get in first and to make sure he did not disturb the waters. The boat began to move slowly across the lake surface as soon as Dumbledore had climbed in.

Harry gazed down at the surface of the water as they crossed spotting the decaying flesh of a human hand just below the surface. It was not alone, he could see more as they crossed. The lake was filled with Inferi.

Dumbledore was the first to leave to boat walking over to the stone basin. The light was much brighter here, painfully so. The headmaster conjured a glass and began to drink the potion within. Harry watch horrified as the man drank down one glass after the other. Harry had to help the man continue to drink further down they went, keeping the promise, he made before they left the castle. Harry wondered what visions the man saw as he screamed in pain, begging the unseen figure for forgiveness.

The potion was gone, a necklace emerged at the bottom of the basin. Dumbledore picked it up to examine it before he collapsed from a wave of pain. His unconscious form spread over Harry’s lap. He woke a moment later, as he pleaded for water. His spells unsuccessful, Harry broke the surface of the water drawing the attention the Inferi, but finally able to bring some comfort to his distressed professor. The enchanted corpse came toward them, Harry’s spells completely ineffective. It was Dumbledore that saved them, casting a ring of fire scaring away the dead.
Harry and the disabled Dumbledore sailed across once more. Harry gave his blood to the stone this time, as he had cut himself their struggle. Harry Apparated the two back to the village of Hogsmeade.

Madame Rosmerta greeting them outside the pub. Harry cursed looking up to see the castle, the Dark Mark shone above the Astronomy Tower. Dumbledore borrowed a pair of brooms from the barmaid, Harry ready to help the injured professor fly to the top of the tower. Dumbledore begged Harry to bring Professor Snape to him. Before Harry could leave to get help the door opened.

“Hello Draco,” Dumbledore greeted weakly.

Harry was frozen under his cloak; the headmaster must have silently cast a Body-Bind spell on him. Draco took the opportunity to Disarm the headmaster. The old man’s wand flying off the top of the tower into the dark grounds below.

Harry listened as the boy talked about how he had managed to get repair the vanishing cabinet that was broken during Harry’s second year. A Slytherin had been caught between the two, in a corridor of sorts, for several weeks the previous year after he tried to sentence Fred and George to detention. As they spoke more Death Eaters appeared, egging Draco to do what he was ordered. Still, the blonde teen did nothing. Snape appeared some minutes later, Dumbledore’s strength all but gone. The old man pleaded with him.

“Avada Kedavra,” Snape said his voice full of hate.

Harry knew that it was coming. He knew the Potion Master was keeping an oath to the man. Still, it shook Harry to his core to witness Dumbledore’s death. The hate in Snape’s voice to those who were unaware of the promise would think he hated the headmaster and could finally show his contempt. Harry saw the truth. He knew how much pain it caused the Potion’s Master to cast the spell, his hatred for having to cast it and audacity of Dumbledore to ask him to commit such an act.

The headmaster gone, Harry was released from his Body-Bind. Harry ran down the stairs, the battle still taking place as the Death Eaters retreated. Harry helped to defend his friends, professors, and assembled Order members as they fought against the intruders. He followed behind Snape, both knew it would be important that it appeared Harry hated the man. Harry watched as his one-time professor Apparated away with Draco.

Harry helped Hagrid to put out the fire on the roof of his house. The half-giant was the first to learn of the headmaster’s death, that was not on the Astronomy Tower. The man carried the broken corpse up to the Hospital Wing to keep in away from the eyes of the students.

Harry found a glittering gold object beside where Dumbledore’s body lay. The locket had fallen out of the dead man’s pocket when he tumbled off the top of the Astronomy Tower. Inside the locket contained a note from R.A.B telling the reader (presumed to be Voldemort) that R.A.B. had stolen the locket and had plans to destroy it.

Harry read the note. He sat frozen where he sat in the Hospital Wing, many of his friends there being treated for their injuries from the fight. Luna, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville were not hurt. The luck potion had done its job. Bill Weasley wasn’t so fortunate.

Bill had come across the werewolf Greyback in the halls. The werewolf had attacked him, mauling his once handsome face. Mrs. Weasley was convinced Fleur would leave him. The younger witch, much to her surprise recommitted herself to Bill, scars and all.

This lead to a much more unexpected admission, Tonks’ love for Remus. The young Auror’s
Patronus was not a large dog, but a wolf, Remus’ wolf. The man had spurned her advances because of his condition, not for lack of affection for the younger woman. It was a heart-broken Professor McGonagall that gave her blessing to the pairing. Saying Dumbledore would have wanted to see both of them happy. That more love was needed in the world, no matter where you might find it.

Harry didn’t like funerals. He had decided this when Mr. Weasley died. When Sirius was confirmed dead, Harry and Remus had decided not have a formal funeral. The whereabouts of Sirius’ remains still unknown. Instead, they had spent an evening out at a Muggle pub drinking with several other members of the Order. Remus had even used a bit of magic to create Harry a fake id that passed the inspection of any Muggle that asked. It turned out it was a trick he had learned from Sirius when the man had been kicked out of his parents’ home during his fifth year of school. The Remus and the others took turns telling Harry all of the stories they could remember of the man. Most were ones Harry had never heard before, all but a rare few taking place before his godfather’s incarceration in Azkaban.

Harry thought back to that night as he took his seat in an uncomfortable wooden chair on the lawn of the school. He shifted in his formal robes as he slipped Luna’s small hand into his own.

Harry’s mind drifted from what the speaker was saying to his first memory of Dumbledore, the very first Chocolate Frog card he collected. Then later that evening to the real man starting the term with a few words of utter nonsense. The man had given Harry all the tools he would need to face Voldemort even as an eleven-year-old boy. He had felt it was important to give Harry the chance to face the man who had shaped his future. Still, there was so much he had never asked, so much he had taken for granted.

Luna’s squeezing of his hand drew him out of his thoughts. Harry looked up almost blinded by the sun reflecting off her pale blond hair. The crowds were starting to break up. The funeral must have ended.

Harry stood, “I’ll be back in a few minutes, I need to talk to Professor McGonagall.”

Luna silently rose to the tips of her toes placing a kiss on his cheek. “I’ll wait for you by the carriages.”

Harry nodded before setting off. He made his way through the crowd of students, Ministry officials, and other notable guests.

Professor McGonagall stood near the front of the rows of chairs speaking to two men in dark robes and metals of foreign office Harry suspected.

“Professor McGonagall,” Harry said approaching the woman.

McGonagall turned to look that the teenager. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” she said politely as possible, making her excuses. “What is it, Potter? I am very busy.”

“I know,” Harry apologized. “I needed to speak to you before got on the train.”

“This matter can’t wait until the start of next term,” the former Transfiguration professor asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head, “I’m not coming back next term.”

The normally stern mask slipped from the woman’s solemn face. “May I ask why?”
“There’s something I have to do, that Dumbledore asked me to do,” Harry said cagily.

“This task cannot wait until you’ve completed your education. You are still underage, Potter,” McGonagall objected.

“I can’t ask for others to wait for me finish my education so I can stay comfortable and warm in the castle. If I wait, many more people will die,” Harry insisted.

“This task, whatever it is, it has to be you to do it?” McGonagall asked.

Harry nodded. “It can’t be anyone else. It has to be me. It’s had to be me since the night You-Know-Who killed my parents.”

“I wish I could assist you, Potter,” McGonagall said softly.

Harry nodded, “Me too,” he paused. “There’s one thing you can do,” he said hopefully.

“What is that Potter,” she said surveying the teen warily.

“Professor Snape,” Harry began. He watched as the tight features darkened at the mention of the Potions Master. “He…there was more…. He was doing what was asked of him in a horrible situation… Please, try and keep in mind even when it may not look like it, he is doing his best to save as many lives as possible.”

McGonagall frowned. “You wish me to believe that Severus Snape killed Albus Dumbledore in order to save the lives of others?”

Harry sighed, “I know how it sounds. I wish I could tell you more, but please try and believe me.”

McGonagall nodded soberly. “Albus was always fascinated with your compassion, Potter. It is a wonder you are growing up with those wretched Muggle relatives.” She placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder, “You look so much like your father,” Harry tried not to roll his eyes at the familiar statement, but was surprised by the end to it, “but have your mother’s heart.”

Harry cocked his head slightly to the side.

“Lily had a great capacity to forgive, even when no others around them could possibly understand how or why.” McGonagall elaborated. “I wish you the best of luck in what you are trying to achieve, Potter. Do your best to stay safe and come back to us when you can.”

“Yes ma’am,” Harry said, adjusting his glasses to cover up wiping the tears that had gathered there.

She squeezed his shoulder once more. Before turning and making her way over to Professor Flitwick who was trying to get her attention.

“What was that about?” Ginny asked coming to stand beside Harry.

The boy shook his head, “I don’t know exactly.”

“You don’t know what you were just talking to McGonagall about?”

“No, not that, the shoulder squeeze,” he clarified.

“I wanted to know what you were telling McGonagall about,” Ginny explained to him.

Harry sighed. “I wish I could tell you, Ginny.”
“It’s just you have to go and be the big bad hero,” Ginny sighed.

Harry looked at her with wide green eyes. “What does that mean?”

“Let me guess, Dumbledore asked you to do something, something big when you left to go to that cave that night. Now, you’re going to leave and do it, no matter what anyone has to say about it.” Ginny said sounding almost bitter.

“Ginny,” Harry began. How could he explain this to her? “I have to go. Dumbledore asked me and I have to go.”

“Did you even think about the people you’ll be leaving behind?” Ginny demanded. “Do you know devastated my mum would be if she found out you were leaving to do Merlin knows what? Do you know what would happen to her if you were to get hurt, let alone killed? She’s already lost Dad. She can’t lose you too.”

“Ginny,” Harry repeated.

“No,” Ginny said defensively. “No, you can’t just vanish this away, Harry.”

The teen moved his wand in a subtle arch around them casting a Silencing Spell around them.

“Ginny, I wish I could tell you what I was doing but I can’t. Dumbledore said that I have to keep it a secret.” Harry pleaded with her to understand.

“Don’t,” she said moving away as he tried to take her upper arm in his hand. “Don’t you understand, if you go… Neville will leave too…”

Harry sighed. He hadn’t considered this action. His friends had been with him every step of the way, why would they not come with him now. He couldn’t ask that of them. He couldn’t take on the responsibility for their safety.

“He won’t,” Harry tried to reassure her.

Ginny shook her head. “He will, he always does.”

Harry shook his head, “He won’t this time. He has too much at stake.”

Ginny scoffed, “And you don’t?”

Harry shook his head again, “I don’t have a family.”

“You do,” insisted Ginny. “We might not be blood but Mum… we all think of you as our family. You have Hermione, Neville, Remus, Hagrid…McGonagall. They are your family, Harry.”

“Then that’s more of a reason I have to go,” Harry said looking away from the girl for the first time. They were alone now on the lawn. He left the spell drop. “We better hurry, or we’ll miss the train.”

Ginny deflated. “Will you miss it at all?”

Harry looked up to the soaring towers, the huge glass windows of the Great Hall, over the Black Lake and the Giant Squid sunning itself on the banks. “More than words can say, this was the first place I ever called home.”

“It will always be waiting you welcome you back,” Ginny said looking up to the boy.
Harry smiled sadly, “I hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

The place that I live is suffering from a major power outage. We don't know how long it will be before power is back, it could be days or weeks. It might delay my posting of the next chapter. Sorry if I end up keeping you hanging.
Summer 1997

Harry flew one last lap around the grounds. Neville was at the back door to the house waving. Algie and Enid must have left then. Harry pointed his broom toward the ground. He did several loops before landing a few feet away from Neville.

"I hope Gran didn't see that," Neville said with a smile.

Harry shrugged. Mrs. Longbottom didn't mind Harry taking the occasional flight of the grounds or having a pickup game of Quidditch when he and Neville's friends visited. However, she vocally disapproved of foolhardy and showboating stunts. She was convinced Harry did to make Neville feel inadequate.

"Are Algie and Enid gone then?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Neville confirmed. "We both just got owls from the Ministry."

"Who's we?" Harry asked as the boys walked the short distance to the broom shed on the side of the house.

"Us," Neville motioned his hand between the two of them.

"What's the Ministry want with us?" asked Harry.

"I don't know," Neville admitted. "Gran wanted me to get you so we could open them together. She thinks it's probably about the same thing since they came together."

Harry nodded. That made sense, why send multiple owls to the same place on the same matter? Still, Harry didn't know what the Ministry might want with him. Was Scrimgeour going to make yet another request for Harry to show his support for the Ministry? If that was the case, why did Neville have a letter too?

"That was a foolish stunt, Potter," Mrs. Longbottom said with a disapproving sniff as the boys entered the sitting room.

"Sorry," Harry said not showing the least bit of remorse. It was a little over two weeks before he turned seventeen years old. He would be free to leave Mrs. Longbottom's care and start his hunt for the Horcruxes. It wouldn't hurt to have his flying skills well-tuned, tricks and all.

"Did Neville inform you of the Ministry's missive?" Mrs. Longbottom said handing Harry a cup of tea. There were two of his favorite biscuits sitting on the saucer. Harry smiled at the sight, Mrs. Longbottom may be hard on him and Neville but the little things she did were a reminder that she truly did care. She was just old fashioned in the way she displayed it.

Harry nodded, "Do you know what it could be about?"

"I have no idea better idea than you, Potter. I suggest that you open them."

Neville set down his cup, gesturing for Harry to do the same. Harry followed his friend's lead and picked up the parchment. They broke the seals of their envelopes together. Harry read through the letter twice the words never sinking in properly. Neville sat beside him, his lips moving silently as he read his letter.
"And what did the Ministry request, Potter," Mrs. Longbottom asked when Harry lowered the letter.

"They want to come here," Harry said looking down to the parchment again.

"In regard to what," demanded Mrs. Longbottom.

"Dumbledore's left me something in his will," Harry informed her.

"You too?" Neville asked.

Harry nodded. "Why would he have done that?" asked Harry. At the glare for the perceived slight of her grandson, Harry elaborated, "I mean, why would Dumbledore leave me anything?"

"You were his favorite," Neville said easily, "everyone knows that."

"I wasn't," Harry tried to protest but stopped with the exasperated look on the other boy's face.

"Harry, who else could do half the things we did and not get in trouble?" Neville asked dumbfounded. "The man gave you points for breaking rules."

"He didn't," Harry refuted.

"What do you call our winning the House Cup our first year?" Neville replied.

"You and Hermione were there too. You got points too," Harry reminded him.

"Only because you were there too," Neville said shaking his head.

"Neville, you will write the Ministry official that sent that and tell them in no certain terms they will not be allowed to come here," Mrs. Longbottom informed her grandson promptly ending any further discussion of the deceased headmaster. "You will do the same, Potter."

"Why me, Gran? Shouldn't it be you?" asked Neville surprised by the concealed anger in the old woman's voice.

"I will be writing the Minister himself. He knows I want nothing to do with him," Mrs. Longbottom said firmly.

Harry looked over at his friend. Neville gave a small shrug. As if to answer the boys’ unasked question Mrs. Longbottom said, "If he was doing his job properly, your mother and father would still be here Neville. Scrimgeour was the head of Magical Law Enforcement Office at the time."

"What are we supposed to say, Gran?" Neville asked looking back to the letter.

"You will tell the Ministry that under no circumstances will you meet with any minister official in our residence or the Ministry of Magic itself. You will do the same, Potter."

Harry nodded. He didn’t want to meet with the Ministry about anything. After his experiences with Umbridge, he had no love for the bureaucracy. Even Minister Scrimgeour’s desire to use him as a mascot was enough to not for him not to want to cooperate with the Ministry’s request.

Harry happily wrote his response in a moment. Neville was a bit more hesitant to do the same. The boys sent their response back with Hedwig after lunch.

Hedwig returned the next morning at breakfast. One of the house elves, Harry still didn’t know all of their names, brought the letters to the table.
“It’s from the Minister himself,” Harry said reading the signature line.

“What does he have to say for himself?” Mrs. Longbottom asked.

“He understands our reluctance to come to the Ministry or to welcome him into our home. The matter he needs to discuss if the utmost of importance so he would like to schedule a meeting at a neutral location such as the Leaky Cauldron or Gringotts.”

“Gringotts,” Mrs. Longbottom said firmly.

“Does yours say the same?” Harry asked Neville.

The other boy nodded, still stunned to receive personal correspondence from the Minister of Magic.

“You can suggest a time next week. We will busy with your birthdays and Weasley wedding the week after,” Mrs. Longbottom offered.

Harry nodded. He wondered what could be so important that the Minister of Magic would be taking time out of his day to write Harry and Neville. The Minister responded that we would meet them at the bank on the following Wednesday at ten in the morning.

Harry woke up on Wednesday morning before dawn, too nervous to get back to sleep. He sank down on his floor opening his trunk. Both of the summers he had stayed with the Longbottoms, Mrs. Longbottom had requested Harry clean out his trunk properly. He had never done it. The first year, he had a hard-enough time getting himself out of bed in the morning to worry about cleaning out the torn clothes and broken quills that had fallen to the bottom of his supplies. He was not trying to make room for his supplies for his last year at Hogwarts. No, he was only looking for the things that would be of use to him on his hunting Horcruxes.

Harry smiled softly as his fingers closed around the soft red leather cover of the photo album that Hagrid gave him at the end of his first year at Hogwarts. He flipped the book to the last page to the photograph of his mother. She was so young and beautiful in this picture. Harry’s heart broke a little thinking out about receiving this photo. It was not in the album when Hagrid had presented it to him. He had gotten it in the owl post on his way back to Little Whinging. Professor Snape had sent it to him because the half-giant had not bothered to ask Lily’s onetime best friend if he had any pictures he might want to contribute to the project.

Harry moved the album into a rucksack he had purchased during his one trip to Muggle London with Sirius. Harry was shocked to learn his godfather; the product of Pureblood fanatics had spent a good amount of time in Muggle London before his time in Azkaban. He had spent a few nights living rough on the streets until he came into a small inheritance from one of his uncles.

Harry pulled out a large stack of books from the side of the trunk. The cast his eye down the titles quickly setting all but one aside. It was not a class text like all the others. It was one of the most practical gifts he had ever received, though. Harry sighed as he put the book on wizarding first aide into the backpack. There was a good chance he might need that in the near future.

Harry might not be returning to the castle but he still would have a number of people he cared about still there. He ran an affectionate hand down the worn parchment. The Marauder’s Map joined the
book and album in the backpack.

Harry threw the “Potter Stinks” badge across the room. The model of the Hungarian Horntail was set on his night table. The little dragon gave a small yawn before curling up in a ball and napping once more. He found the last thing that he was looking for as he scraped the bottom of his trunk, the two-way mirror that Sirius had meant to give him before he returned from winter holidays. He had never gotten the chance, however, kidnapped and killed by the Death Eaters while they tried to escape Azkaban.

“What’s all this,” Neville asked looking into Harry’s room.

“What?” Harry said dumbly.

“Don’t let Gran see this mess. You know how she like our rooms to be neat,” Neville teased. Harry shrugged.

“What are you doing?” Neville said more seriously as he took a seat on Harry’s bed.

“Cleaning out my trunk,” Harry explained.

“Then shouldn’t you be putting your books in there?” Neville asked. Harry shook his head. Neville frowned in confusion.

“I’m not going back,” Harry explained.

“Don’t be daft,” Neville protested.

“I can’t go, Neville,” Harry said slipping the mirror into the backpack.

“You can,” Neville insisted. Harry shook his head, “No, there’s something more important that I have to do.”

“More important than your education,” Neville asked skeptically. Harry nodded. “It’s something that Dumbledore asked me to do.”

Neville didn’t get a chance to ask what that would be because his grandmother was yelling they would be late for their appointment with the Minister of Magic.

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Harry walked slowly up the marble steps of the Gringotts bank. It was still as intimidating as it was the first time he came at eleven years old. That was just under six years ago. He had been accompanied on that trip by Professor Snape who had rescued Harry for the first of oh so many times. That morning The Daily Prophet had announced the man was to be the new Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The Daily Prophet had announced the man was to be the new Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Harry was the only person who knew the whole truth of what happened at the top of the Astronomy
Tower. Most of the people in the wizarding community thought Snape was the cold-blooded murderer of Albus Dumbledore. Harry bury his thoughts of that night deep under his shields. He didn’t need to see the old man falling off the tower once again.

“Mr. Potter, Mrs. Longbottom,” a goblin greeted as they entered the bank.

Harry and his companions followed the little man down a long hall off to the side of the huge lobby.

“Harry,” Hermione greeted brightly pulling the boy into a tight hug as soon as he entered the room.

“What are you doing here,” Harry asked confused, hugging the girl right back.

“I don’t know exactly,” she admitted. She broke away to give Neville the same greeting, despite the disapproving looks from Mrs. Longbottom.

Harry was free to look around the room now that his vision wasn’t blocked by a mass of curly brown hair. The Minister of Magic sat in a large plush chair by a large window. Next to the Minister were the matching heads of Fred and George Weasley. Then came another unexpected person.

“Luna,” Harry announced.

“Hullo Harry,” the blonde greeted.

Luna motioned for him to come and sit beside her. Harry hesitated. Hermione shoving him between the shoulder blades set him into motion. He sat next to the girl. She gave him a sad smile as she wound her fingers between his.

“If we are ready,” the Minister said curtly cutting off any chance for further greetings. The rest of the group found seats quickly. “I have gathered you here for the reading of the will of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.”

“Why are we doing this now?” Hermione asked.

“What was that Miss Granger?” The minister asked annoyed.

“What has it taken this long?” Hermione repeated.

“The Ministry needed to ensure that the bequeathed items were safe.” The minister explained tersely.

“You’re only supposed to do that if the items are suspected to contain dark magic,” Hermione protested.

“Hermione,” Harry grumbled.

“Are you planning on following a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?” Scrimgeour asked.

“No,” Hermione said vehemently, “I want to do some good in the world.”

Fred and George laughed at the horrified face of the Minister of Magic.

“The girl has a good question, Rufus. Why are you giving their items now?” Mrs. Longbottom said from the corner.

“It’s because they have to,” Hermione said answering her own question. “They have to give them to us now that the thirty-one-day limit has passed. If they haven’t found anything containing dark magic they are required to give them back.”
Mrs. Longbottom glared at Scrimgeour. “You believed Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of our times, would pass on dark artifacts to school children? Are you really that much of a fool?”

“Why would Dumbledore choose to leave anything thing to students? Were you close to the headmaster, Mr. Weasley?” Scrimgeour demanded of Fred.

Fred shrugged, “Dumbledore and I spent a good amount of time together over the years.”

Harry was impressed at how easily the boy answered the question. Had Fred really known Dumbledore all that well?

“And you Miss Lovegood,” Scrimgeour asked turning to Luna.

“It’s not your place to question their relationship with the man, Rufus,” Mrs. Longbottom warned. “Give the children their items and let us be on our way. We have no desire to keep you from your important Ministry business.” Harry could hear the contempt in her voice as she said that phrase.

“To Luna Lovegood, I leave the painting, Vanishing Girl,” Scrimgeour read as a small framed painting was placed on the goblin’s desk. “Do you have an idea why Dumbledore would leave you a painting Miss Lovegood?”

“I like to make friends with the portraits,” Luna said looking away from the confused Minister of Magic.

“Do you know this particular painting?” The minister demanded.

“Not yet,” Luna said looking at the painting. “She has pretty hair though. I wonder where she is going.”

The Minister moved on not sure how to respond to such comments.

“To Frederick Gideon Weasley,” Scrimgeour began again, “I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it. That is a valuable item, Mr. Weasley. It may be even unique. Certainly, it is of Dumbledore’s own design. Why would he have left you an item so rare?”

“Ahhh,” Fred said airily. “He always did like a good joke.”

“To what use did he think you would put his Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?”

“Maybe he figured it could help me and George put out some lights. It’s so much easier to set a prank in the dark.” Fred answered.

The Minister seemed to accept this answer.

Scrimgeour read the next entry, “To George Fabian Weasley, I leave a vial of phoenix tears from my own familiar Fawkes. The tears of the phoenix are one of the rarest ingredients in existence. They must be freely given. Why would he leave you something so rare? His fondness for jokes again?”

“Probably not,” George admitted. “No, Fawkes took a shine to me. He healed a pretty bad cut I got a while back.”

Scrimgeour’s frown deepened unsure if the young man was lying.

“To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope, she will find it entertaining and instructive.” Scrimgeour asked Hermione, “Why would Dumbledore leave you this item?”
“He…He knew I liked books,” Hermione choked out, her voice tight with emotion.


“No,” Hermione said as she wiped her eyes. “If the Ministry didn’t find a code it in the last month, I doubt I will.”

The Minister’s temper was becoming increasingly short.

“To Harry James Potter, I leave the golden snitch that he caught in his first ever Quidditch game at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.”

“Why would he leave you this snitch, Potter?” Scrimgeour demanded.

“I don’t know,” Harry said as he took the ball in hand.

It was clear from the way he watched Harry’s action he expected the ball to react some way.

“Was there something special about that first match?” Scrimgeour asked.

“I don’t remember,” Harry lied, hoping his face didn’t give him away.

The Minister looked as if he was going to argue, but changed his mind, “Mr. Neville Longbottom, I leave the sword of Gryffindor as a reminder that bravery can come in many forms. Sadly, I will not be able to present you this item, Mr. Longbottom.”

“What,” demanded the rest of the group.

“You have no right,” objected Hermione.

“Dumbledore had no right to give the sword away. It was not his personal belonging, but that of Godric Gryffindor. The sword can present itself to any worthy Gryffindor. It did not present itself to Mr. Longbottom, so he can not claim that it was his that way.”

“Oi,” hissed Fred. “That’s uncalled for, Minister. You don’t have to insult Neville. He’s plenty a Gryffindor. He stood up to a twelve-foot mountain troll as a first-year.”

Neville blushed slightly.

“My grandson is worthy of anything that Dumbledore tried to bestow him,” Mrs. Longbottom said. “Come now children, the Minister has things he needs to get to,” Mrs. Longbottom issued the group of young people out of the room before the Minister was able to voice any further objections. Fred and George took Hermione and Luna with them to the shop before they were to return the Burrow that evening.

“Augusta,” Madam Bones greeted Mrs. Longbottom as the re-entered the lobby of the bank.

“Amelia,” Mrs. Longbottom replied.

“May I discuss a matter with you,” Madam Bones requested.

“I was going to take Neville and Potter back to the house,” Mrs. Longbottom protested.

“It’s rather pressing,” Madam Bones pleaded.

“We can go and wait in Fred and George’s shop,” Harry suggested.

Mrs. Longbottom sighed, “Very well, I don’t want to see any of their…products…in the house, Potter.”
“Yes ma’am,” Harry said as he motioned for Neville to follow him out of the bank.

Harry sank in beside Luna on the newly transfigured sofa. The inherited items lay across the coffee table in front of them.

“What are we supposed to do with all of this?” Harry asked the room in general.

“I don’t know, mate,” Fred admitted. “I don’t even know what this is.” He picked up the object that resembled a silver cigarette lighter once more.

Fred flicked the button once more, the nearest light was drawn to the Deluminator “Does it do that every time?” Neville asked.

The redhead flicked it again, the light returning to the lamp.

“Why would he leave us that?” George asked. ”What good is that going to do?”

“To provide a light in the darkest of times,” Luna said airily.

Fred frowned, slipping the lighter into his pocket. Harry's fingers closed around the small gold ball.

“What could be so special about this?” Harry asked.

“They have flesh memories,” Luna remarked.

“All snitches have flesh memories,” Hermione pointed out.

“What do you think Dumbledore enchanted it so only Harry could open it or something?” asked George.

“It’s possible,” Hermione answered. “You had to notice the way Scrimgeour watched Harry take it from him. He clearly expected something to happen.”

“I didn’t catch this one,” Harry objected.

“Yes, you did,” Neville insisted.

Harry shook his head, “No, I didn’t catch the snitch in my first game, I nearly swallowed it.”

“Why didn’t you say that before?” inquired Hermione.

“I didn’t want Scrimgeour asking too many questions,” Harry said with a smile. He placed his lips on the small gold ball. Words in Dumbledore’s familiar hand appeared, ‘I open at the close.’ Harry read the words aloud.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” demanded George.

“Don’t know George,” Fred said honestly. “Knowing Dumbledore, it’s some sort of puzzle.”

Harry nodded setting the Golden Snitch back on the table.

There was a pause as they stared at the remaining objects. Fred picked up the copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard. "You remember what page ‘Babbitty Rabbitty’ was on, George?”
“Fifty-three,” George said easily.

Fred opened the book to find the mentioned page but groaned a moment later. “It’s in ancient ruins. Who wants to do all that work for ‘The Wizard and the Hopping Pot?’”

Hermione took the book back from him. “Clearly it wasn’t left to you for a reason.” She opened the book flipping through the book for the requested story.

“That’s strange,” Luna said pointing at a symbol at the top of one of the pages.

Harry frowned. “What’s strange?”

“That’s not a ruin,” she said indicating the mark once more.

“It’s not?” Harry asked.

Hermione studied it for a moment. “It’s not one I’m familiar with if it is. Do you have a copy of Spellman’s Syllabary?”

“Why in the name of Merlin would we have one of those?” George asked. “We didn’t take Ancient Ruins.”

Hermione shook her head in disapproval.

“You wouldn’t find it in there,” Luna insisted. “It’s not a ruin, it’s the Hollows.”

Hermione ignored the comment and instead asked, “Why would Dumbledore leave us a painting?” She turned to the blonde girl that had had a comment to everything in the past. “Do you know who she is?”

“No,” Luna said firmly. “She has lovely hair though…”

Harry sighed.

"The tears of a phoenix make sense,” Harry said picking up the small glass vial.

"Really?” protested George.

Harry nodded. "They've saved my life once already. Down in the Chamber of Secrets. I would have died from the basilisk bite if it weren't for Fawkes."

"Why did Dumbledore try and leave me the sword?" Neville asked. His fingers twisted the hem of his shirt. "Harry's the one that drew the sword from the Sorting Hat."

"You're just as much of Gryffindor as I am," Harry said with a smile. "You've been with me every step of the way."

"Not every," Neville protested. "You faced You-Know-Who alone at the graveyard."

Harry shook his head. "You would have been there if you could."

“I agree with Neville, he isn’t the logical choice to leave the sword. It should have been you, Harry. You’re the one who removed it from the Sorting Hat. Why did Dumbledore think we need the sword anyway?”

Harry sighed, “That’s something I need to tell you all.”
“What’s that?” Fred asked.

“Is there something you haven’t told us before?” Hermione asked finally putting her book away.

Harry nodded. “Dumbledore didn’t want me to tell you anything. He was worried that the more people knew the greater the risk the information could fall into the wrong hands.”

“Then shouldn’t you obey his wishes,” Neville said uneasily.

“No,” Harry insisted, “Dumbledore…I understand why he wanted to do that way. But I need you to all to understand. There’s so much…”

“Harry,” Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand anxiously.

The boy pulled his hand away. He rose and ran a hand through his already messy hair.

“What do we need to know?” Fred asked as Harry paced the small room.

Harry sighed.

“Is it about You-Know-Who?” Neville suggested.

Harry nodded.

“Does it have to do with the sword too?” added George.

Harry shook his head then hesitated, “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” asked Hermione.

Harry sighed. “I don’t know. There were so many things I didn’t get a chance to ask him. Things he didn’t explain. But there are things you should know. Things you will have to know if for whatever reason I’m not there…”

“Don’t say that,” Hermione pleaded.

“It’s war, Hermione,” Harry said flatly. “We have to acknowledge that anybody can die.”

“I know…” Hermione said weakly.

“What is that we need to know?” Fred said directing them back to the original topic.

Harry sat back down and told them all about what his lessons with Dumbledore had covered. He told them of Voldemort’s miserable childhood in the orphanage, his propensity to steal items from those he terrorized. He explained everything he knew about Horcruxes, the way the dark magic could get to those who spent time with them, the diary that possessed Ginny in her first year at school the first Horcrux to be destroyed, how Voldemort had placed protective magic around them, the ring had carried a deadly curse that had lead to the death of the greatest wizard in a century, what had happened in the cave the night Dumbledore died. The only thing he didn’t tell them what he learned from Professor Snape after the attack on Malfoy.

The group determined that Harry and Hermione would leave on the hunt directly from the wedding. If anything were to go wrong between then and the wedding they were to meet at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. They would determine what to do from there.

Mrs. Longbottom came in some time later. Whatever business Madam Bones needed to discuss with her must have been very complicated. It was nearly dinner time by the time they arrived back to the Longbottom’s house.
Neville’s grandmother retired not long after dinner. Harry and Neville said goodnight to her and moved into the study to play a game of chess.

“Harry,” Neville said as he moved his pawn in his opening move.

“What is it Neville,” Harry said moving with practiced ease to counter the move. Neville almost always opened with the same move. It was later in the game that he got more inventive and hard to predict.

“I’ve been with you since we went through the trap door in first-year,” Neville said as he studied Harry’s move.

Harry nodded. “I know.”

Neville took a deep breath, “You’re not going back to Hogwarts.”

“I’m not,” Harry confirmed. “What’s wrong, Neville?”

Neville took another deep breath, mumbling something into his chest.

“What was that?” Harry asked apologetically.

“I can’t come with you this time,” Neville said nervously.

Harry’s hand paused as made to move his bishop.

“I know you probably want me to come. I would. I don’t want to leave you without support. But Gran…” Neville rambled.

“Neville, stop,” Harry ordered.

Neville stopped speaking, his eyes wide. “I knew you wouldn’t be coming,” Harry said setting the forgotten bishop into an almost random square.

“You did,” Neville asked shocked.

Harry nodded. “Your gran is too important to you. She would murder me if something were to happen to you.”

Neville gave him a weak smile. “She would. She won’t be too happy to hear that you’re not going back to school. You know how important education is to her.”

“I know,” Harry said with a chuckle. “That’s why I’m not going to tell her.”

“What!” Neville demanded. “You’re just going to disappear?”

Harry shook his head. “I going to leave a note for her to find after the wedding.”

“You know she’ll murder you for that the next time she sees you,” Neville asked.

“What else can I do?” Harry asked.

Neville sighed and shook his head. “At least you’re not taking the Knight Bus in the middle of the night.”
“I’m never taking that bus again if I can help it,” Harry said with a grin.

“Can you believe Stan Shunpike is a Death Eater,” Neville asked with a shake of his head.

“The Ministry said he was one,” Harry corrected. “If Stan really is a Death Eater I’ll kiss Malfoy.”

Neville’s outburst of laughter at the statement woke a very disgruntled portrait of the boy’s great-great-grandfather.

Harry sat next to Neville at the dining table at the Burrow on the night before the wedding, Neville’s birthday.

“I have held onto this for you for a long time,” Mrs. Longbottom said passing over a small box.

Neville carefully ran a finger under the tape. His fingers twitched as he revealed a brown leather box to display a handsome gold pocket watch. With great love and care touched the face of the watch.

“This was Dad’s,” Neville said softly.

“And his grandfather’s before him,” his grandmother supplied. “I told you it would be yours.”

Neville nodded. “I know, Gran. I’ll take good care of it.”

She gave him a warm smile. “I trust you will.” She handed Harry a slightly large box than Neville’s had been. “I know you haven’t spent much time in your family’s vault. As your guardian, William was able to grant me access to collect this for you.”

Harry looked over to Bill who shrugged. Harry pulled back the paper. He frowned at the small hinged bits of wood. He removed it from the box opening it to see two faces.

“Good Lord it’s bright,” complained the male face on the right side. Harry studied his features. He had seen this man’s face once before in the Mirror of Erised. He had the small bit of hair that stuck up at the back of his head that Harry and James both had. “Hello, James.”

“Language dear,” the woman scolded lightly. “That’s not James, dear. James didn’t have such lovely green eyes, his eyes were hazel.”

“Right,” grumbled the man.

“James was my dad,” Harry informed the pair.

“That makes us your great-grandparents,” the woman said with a warm smile, “I am Genevive and my husband is Thaddeus. What is your name, love?”

“Harry,” the boy said, “Harry Potter.”

“That’s lovely, we are pleased to meet you, Harry,” the old witch said.

Harry did his best to hide the tears that were accumulating the corner of his eyes during this short exchange.
Sensing the need to move on, Remus took a box from Tonk and handed it to Neville saying, “I can’t say mine will have as much meaning as your Gran’s but I hope you like it.”

Neville wiped at the corner of his own still misty eyes. “That’s fine, Remus. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

Remus had gotten Neville a text on the care of a fanged teruntella plant, to go along with the small cutting of the plant. If the boy, now young man took care of it properly, it would grow into a huge predatory plant capable of eating rats and other small mammals within a year.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Remus reassured, “we didn’t get you a plant.”

Harry gave the werewolf a small smile, “Thanks.” Then realizing what the man had said, “Who’s we?”

“Me and Dora,” Remus answered.

“Dora,” Harry repeated looking to the werewolf, then to the woman beside him.

“It’s still Tonks to you,” the witch said. Her hair was back to the shocking pink Harry always associated with the witch.

“What else would it be,” Harry said confused.

“Merlin, you’re thick, Potter,” George complained exasperatedly.

“Look at her hand, Harry,” Fred ordered. “Are you sure that we are depending on you to win this war?”

Harry did as he was told and looked at Tonks’ hands. On the left, she wore a thin gold band with a small diamond between two equally small rubies.

“Wait,” Harry demanded. “Remus, you got married?”

The werewolf nodded. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to let you attend. We’ve kept it pretty quiet. The Ministry has been particularly anti-werewolf at the moment.”

Harry shook his head in dismissal. “Nevermind that,” Harry said with a grin. “This is the most brilliant thing I’ve heard in ages.”

Remus sighed in relief. He must have been concerned how Harry might have taken the news.

“That’s not your present,” Tonks interjected.

“It’s not?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Of course not,” Tonks said as if it was the most obvious thing.

Tonks passed him over a small wooden box. Harry opening it to see it was filled with a number glass vials filled with many different colored liquids. Harry read the names of a few.

“They’re healing potions,” Harry observed.

“They are,” Remus confirmed, “I didn’t brew them and I know you don’t care for brewing. I thought you might appreciate these to assist with such a task if you were in need.”
Harry’s head bobbed up and down, “These will be very useful, I’m sure.”

Mrs. Weasley’s gifts were next. For Neville, she had purchased a new pair of dragon-hide gloves. To Harry, she gave a watch. “I’m sorry this isn’t new,” she apologized.

Harry recognized it in an instant. “This was Mr. Weasley’s,” Harry said rubbing a speck of dirt from the face.

“Arthur would have wanted you to have it,” Mrs. Weasley said softly.

Harry removed the watch from its box and strapped it to his left wrist. Hagrid had gotten both boys the same thing, a fuzzy drawstring pouch made of mokeskin, they could wear them around their necks. The sacks could only be opened by its owner. They were weightless despite how full they were and could expand to more than ten times their size.

Harry knew at once what he was going to put in his sack. There were few items that were important to him, that would not fit in it. The only things that would not were his Firebolt, Hedwig, and possibly the photo album. Everything else from his rucksack could fit in there.

Neville seemed a bit more confused what to do with the gift. Unlike Harry, he had never had to worry about hiding his prized possessions from those who might want to take or destroy them. Hermione gave them each a Sneakoscope. Luna had presented Neville with a dirigible plum. Her gift to Harry was a bit less straightforward, an enchanted box. Her card said the box would not let the dark escape. Harry smiled and kissed her not sure what he could possibly do with the box. He would make sure to add it his pouch later away. Luna normally had a reason for what she did, even if it seemed totally mad to anyone else.

The morning of the wedding was chaotic as everyone prepared for the ceremony that evening. Harry, along with the twins, and Ron were serving as ushers. Percy and Charlie were the groomsmen and best man respectively. Harry didn’t mind the job. Many were surprised to see the famous Harry Potter helping out in such away. The only person he hadn’t enjoyed helping find their seat was Great Auntie Muriel. She made several comments about his messy hair. It reminded him greatly of Aunt Petunia. He expected this is what she would be when she was this old.

As he left to help the next guest Harry heard her making comments to the person beside her about the quality of the decorations.

“Is she always like that?” Harry asked.

“There’s always something wrong?” asked George.

“That you’re not good enough?” Fred continued.

“ Asking questions she has no right to?” said George.

Harry nodded.

“Always,” the twins answered together.

“Our Muriel isn’t happy when there’s not something to complain about. And when there’s nothing to
complain about, she’ll complain about that,” explained Fred.

“She’s not that bad,” Percy insisted as he joined the small group at the back of the tent.

“Then you take care of her during the reception,” ordered Ron. “Ronald, you must do something about that hair. Ronald, what’s that fuzz on your lip?”

They all laughed.

“I’ll take care of her,” Percy agreed.

Harry sat in the row just behind the Weasley family, Luna to his left, Hermione on his right. Krum sat on Hermione’s far side, but he seemed to be leaning away from her. Harry watched curiously as they aged wizard conducted the bonding ceremony that was a wizarding wedding. The only thing he could compare it to was what he had seen on television. It didn’t seem all that different from a Muggle ceremony.

The reception was one of the biggest parties Harry had ever been to. The dance floor was crowded with guests. Ron was stepping all over Lavender's toes as they stumbled their way around the floor. Harry was doing his best not to do the same to Luna.

As they made their way around the floor Harry spotted Hermione. The girl’s features were tense. He did his best to follow her line of sight as he spun Luna under this arm. Krum stood by the drinks table, talking with Ginny. The redheaded girl was laughing at something Krum must have said.

“What’s wrong,” Luna asked as Harry narrowly avoided crashing into another of the house elf loaded down with goblets.

He gestured to Hermione. “Should we go talk to her?”

Luna pulled Harry off the dance floor. Hermione stood fuming where she was before.

“Come,’ Luna said moving the girl to one of the back tables.

“Can you get us some drinks, Harry?” Luna asked.

Confused Harry left the girls to talk.

“Potter,” Krum said.

“That girl, Ginny, I was talking to, is she still dating your friend… Neville,” Krum asked.

“Yeah, she is and he’s the jealous type,” Harry said for good measure.

Krum muttered something under his breath in Bulgarian.

Harry grabbed three mugs of butterbeer heading back to the table. He dodged around the tables as house elves moved around with trays of things. He almost crashed into a table as he tried to avoid crashing into a pushed out chair.

“Your reflexes are still excellent James,” an old woman said.

Harry frowned at the comment, “Mrs. Bagshot it’s Harry.”

“You were always Albus’ favorite son, James. He would want you to see this,” Mrs. Bagshot said removing something from her bag.
Harry took the offered item, “This is Rita Skeeter’s book. How did you get a copy?”

The old woman had toddled off before she answered his question. Harry slipped the book under his arm as he picked up the mugs of butterbeer once more.

“What’s that,” Hermione said taking her mug from Harry.

“A copy of Rita Skeeter’s new book,” Harry said giving Luna her own mug.

“Why do you have it?” Hermione asked, picking it up to look at the cover.

“Bathilda Bagshot though I was my dad. She said he was always Dumbledore’s favorite son.” Harry explained.

“Favorite son,” Hermione repeated confusedly.

Harry shrugged, “They told us last summer she’s gone a bit batty.”

“Hermione,” Krum said getting the girl’s attention.

“Have you come to apologize?”

“What do I have to apologize?” Krum demanded.

“You were flirting with Ginny! She’s Neville’s girlfriend,” Hermione snapped.

Krum made a disapproving noise, “That’s not important now!”

“It’s not,” Hermione said dangerously. “What could be so much more important?”

“Who is that man,” Krum demanded, pointing at Mr. Lovegood across the way, his yellow robes easy to spot.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Harry said cautiously, “He’s Luna’s father.”

Krum looked from Harry to his girlfriend. “Why does your father wear the sign of Grindelwald?”

“Are you sure it’s Grindelwald’s sign?” Harry asked.

“I am not mistaken,” Krum said coldly. “I walked past the sign for several years, I know it well.”

Harry sighed.

Luna was much more down to earth than usual when she spoke. “It’s not Grindelwald’s sign.”

“I am not mistaken,” Krum insisted as his fingers curled around the hilt of his wand.

Luna’s response was cut short as a silver lynx came running onto the dance floor. It spoke in the low, slow, and deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. “The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

Hermione grabbed Harry and Luna’s wrists and Apparated them away. Harry opened his eyes once
the world stopped spinning to see a familiar door, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

“Where are we,” Luna asked.

“A place I once called home,” Harry said morosely pushed open the door.

The hall was dark as they entered. Harry carefully avoided where troll leg umbrella stand normally stood. He frowned when he spotted it on the ground.

Harry shook his head. The temperature dropped as a black cloud in the shape of Albus Dumbledore came rushing toward them, his head out stretched.

“We didn’t kill you,” Harry yelled. The cloud disappeared in a black puff.

“Moody must have done that after Dumbledore’s...after that night…” Hermione said her voice still shaken.

Harry nodded as he stepped further into the house, righting the umbrella stand as he went. Hermione lit a few of the glass lamps as they walked into the house.

Harry led the way to the familiar space of the drawing room. The abandoned game of chess he and Sirius were playing over Christmas before his disappearance still sat on the low table, untouched. Harry was half-tempted to overturn the board. Instead, he sank into Sirius’ favorite chair.

The girls sat next to each other on the sofa. The room was filled with a heavy silence, the only sound, the soft ticking of the mantle clock Sirius had gotten Remus for his birthday during Harry’s fourth year at Hogwarts.

The creaking of the stairs had all three on their feet, wands drawn in an instant.

“It’s only me,” Remus said holding up his hands.

“Prove it,” Harry demanded not lowering his wand.

Remus nodded. “Ask anything you like?”

“What was the only thing Sirius could fix for breakfast,” Harry asked.

“Beans on toast,” Remus said with a sad smile. “What was sitting in my office the first time Harry Potter and I had tea?”

“A grindylow,” Harry said, finally lowering his wand.

“Luna, Hermione,” Remus said. “You would do well to express some of Harry’s caution.”

“Yes sir,” Hermione replied instantly.

Remus shook his head.

“What’s happening?” Harry asked. “How’s everyone? Did they catch anyone?”

“Everyone escaped,” Remus informed him. “The Weasleys are being questioned but are unhurt. They will be under the watch of those calling themselves the Ministry for the foreseeable future.”

Harry looked to Hermione who shook her head so slightly that it was almost unnoticeable.
“What is it?” Remus asked.

“Nothing,” Harry dismissed. “Don’t you need to get home?”

Remus sighed, “Yes, Dora was quite upset.”

“Is she okay?” Harry asked worriedly.

“Fine,” Remus reassured, “she was unharmed, just shaken up.”

“Then what?” Harry began.

“It’s nothing…” Remus said.

“Can you take Luna back with you,” Harry requested.

“I want to stay,” Luna said looking up to Harry.

“No,” Harry said firmly, “I can’t let you come.”

“It’s not your decision to make,” Luna told him.

“Luna,” Harry sighed, “I can’t put you in that much danger. This is different than anything else we’ve ever done. Besides, you’re underage. You’ll still have the Trace on you.”

“Harry,” Luna said her tone much lower, pleading.

“No,” Harry said firmly, “I can’t do that to you. You matter too much to me.” He pulled the blonde close to his chest. “I need you to be safe. That means away from me. You’ll go back to Hogwarts in a month. The teachers will protect you there.”

Luna held tightly onto Harry. “We’ll wait for you to return.”

Harry dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I know you will.” He gave her a tight squeeze before letting her go. He pushed her gently away toward the werewolf.

Luna took the man’s hand and they were gone in the blink of an eye, leaving Harry and Hermione alone in the once again silent room.

“We should get some sleep,” Harry said unsure what else to do.

“Can we…can we stay here tonight…together…I don’t think I could stand being alone right now.” Hermione pleaded.

Harry watched as Hermione removed two large squishy sleeping bags from the beaded bag she had carried with her at the wedding.

“What do you have in there?” Harry asked.

“Everything I could think we might need,” she said easily. “I have your rucksack with your clothes, my belongings, some books, the products Fred and George gave you for your birthday…”

“Yes,” Harry summarized with a grin. He really could never fully capture in words how grateful he was for his friend’s preparedness.

Harry let Hermione take the sofa as he lay a few inches from the piece of furniture below her. He drifted off into an uneasy slumber sometime later, lulled to sleep by the gentle sounds of Hermione’s
slow deep breaths. He woke early, the light coming through the curtains still the purpley black of pre-dawn. He stretched to get the ache of sleeping on the floor out of his back.

Restless, Harry wandered the house, his feet leading him, his destination unknown.

Harry found himself upstairs standing outside Sirius’ bedroom door. In all the time, he lived here he had never been inside his Godfather’s bedroom. Harry pushed open the door not sure what to expect.

The room was covered in faded red and gold banners of Gryffindor. There were Muggle posters of motorcycles and bikini clad girls. Harry ran a hand over the bureau. His hand found a piece of parchment. He picked it up letting his eyes take in the words.

It was a letter from his mother, Lily to Sirius. They were already living in Godric’s Hollow. James was anxious to escape, even for a little while, but Dumbledore had his Invisibility Cloak. What was most interesting to Harry was the mention of Bathilda Bagshot and what she had to say about Dumbledore.

“Harry,” Hermione called. “Harry,” she called again, sounding a bit more panicked.

“Up here,” Harry called back.

“Thank goodness,” Hermione said joining Harry in Sirius’ room.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “I’d never been in here. Not the whole time we lived together.”

“Oh Harry,” Hermione said softly running a hand over his back. Harry shook his head, “I’m fine,” he passed her the letter he found.

Hermione smiled as she read. “Where’s the rest?”

“I don’t know. I want to go to Godric’s Hollow, Hermione. I want to know what Bagshot was on about at the wedding.” Harry inform his friend.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Harry?” Hermione asked. “I’m sure he’ll expect you to do there. He’ll be watching it. Maybe later, after we’ve found a Horcrux or two.

Harry sighed, “We have no idea where they are, Hermione. I can’t help feeling that Dumbledore would want me to go there. It would make sense that You-Know-Who left a Horcrux there.”

“Harry, I’m having a hard time believing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named could have made as many as seven Horcruxes. From what I’ve been reading, the soul becomes unstable after making one. To make seven is…” Hermione drifted off.

“Is pushing magic beyond its limits,” Harry finished.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. Her stomach growled, breaking the tension of the room.

“Let’s get some breakfast,” Harry said pushing her back out of the room.

“Are you going to move back into your old room?” Hermione asked as they entered the hallway.

Harry looked at the door across from Sirius’ room. “I don’t know. May-”

“Harry,” Hermione said worried as Harry had stopped speaking mid-sentence.
“Look at the sign, Hermione,” Harry said pointing at the door to Regulus’ bedroom.

The sign read, “Do not enter without the express permission of Regulus Arcturus Black.”

“R.A.B. Do you think it’s the same RAB from the locket?” Hermione asked excitedly.

“Professor Snape said Regulus was a Death Eater. If he got disenchanted with what You-Know-Who was doing. He could have stolen the necklace,” Harry said speaking faster as he went.

“There was a necklace. Remember when we were cleaning up that first summer?” Hermione asked.

“Nobody could open it,” Harry agreed. “Do we know what happened to it?”

“We threw everything out,” Hermione said uncertainly.

“No,” Harry countered. “Sirius wanted to, but Kreacher snuck tons of things back,” Harry said very clearly, “Kreacher.”

The ugly old elf appeared before them an instant later.

“Master called,” Kreacher croaked.

“What happened to that necklace that no one could open from when we were clearing up those years ago?” Harry asked. Then he added before Kreacher could answer, “You must not lie to me.”

“Kreacher took back Master Regulus’ locket,” the elf answered.

“Bring it to me, Kreacher,” Harry ordered.

“Kreacher can’t,” the elf said brokenly.

“Why?” Harry demanded.

“Mundungus Fletcher stole all of Kreacher’s things,” The elf said between sobs.

“Go find him,” Harry ordered.

The elf disappeared with a crack.

“Now what do we do?” Harry asked softly.

Harry made the two of them breakfast. Hermione read Harry several of the tales out of “Beedle the Bard,” as they waited.

The rest of the day passed as they waited anxiously for news. Harry and Hermione had decided to move upstairs. Harry was back in Regulus’ old room, Hermione in the room next door.

“Hermione, what happened to that book Bagshot gave me at the wedding?” Harry asked over lunch their second morning at number twelve.

“It’s in my bag,” she answered distractedly as she read through The Tales of Beedle the Bard once more.

“Of course, it is,” Harry said. He should have expected nothing less from his friend.

“Is there something you wanted to see,” Hermione asked.
“I don’t know. There are so many things he didn’t tell me.” Harry said uneasily.

“And you think Rita Skeeter is the best place to start looking for answers,” Hermione asked skeptically. “You know what she’s like, Harry. How much truth do you really think is in that book?”

“How much truth did Dumbledore tell me?” Harry shot back frustrated. “He never told me anything. He waited for me to go running into a situation and hope that I came out of it alright. He only ever told me the least amount of information that I needed afterward to explain what happened.”

“How is reading lies about Dumbledore going to make up for that Harry,” Hermione asked calmly.

Harry sighed. “How can we know they’re lies?”

“Harry,” Hermione said cautiously.

“Auntie Muriel and some of Neville’s gran's friends have said some things,” Harry said.

“Said things about what?”

“About Dumbledore when he was young, about his family. He never told me about them,” Harry said uncertainly. “There’s something about them he didn’t want anyone to know.”

“And you think that might be in the book,” Hermione guessed.

“Maybe,” Harry said with a shrug.

Hermione dug the book out from the depth of her bag and handed it to Harry, with a look of disapproval.

Hermione spent the next several days going through the books Sirius left Harry to see if anything might be useful in their hunt. There was little she considered truly useful. The other ones she added to the beaded handbag she always had now.

As they were sitting down to lunch on the third day there was the sound of the front door opening. Harry and Hermione drew their wands as the intruder faced the cloud Dumbledore.

“Who’s there?” Harry demanded meeting them at the end of the hall.

“It’s us you spotted git,” Fred said coming into view.

“What did Fred and George try and send me my first stay in the Hospital Wing after the thing with Quirrell?” Harry asked wand still pointed at the nearer of the twins.

“A toilet seat you git,” George snapped. “Now lower your bloody wands.”

Harry did as requested, “You alright?”

“As good as we can be. The Ministry spent the last two days interrogating us about where you might be,” Fred answered.
“Everyone okay,” Harry asked leading them down to the kitchen.

“Everyone’s fine. They think that Ron should know where you are,” George replied casually.

“Ron!” Hermione and Harry said together.

“The lot they sent us obviously aren’t the sharpest quill in the pot,” George said with a grin.

“They didn’t ask Ginny hardly anything. Maybe because Neville was still at the wedding when you lot disappeared,” Fred explained. “When is Neville joining us or is he here already?”

“He’s not coming,” Harry said softly.

“What was that Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Neville’s not coming,” Harry said again loud enough for all to hear.

“Don’t tell me that he’s chickened out now,” Fred said.

“Don’t say that,” Hermione said hitting him in the upper arm. “Neville wouldn’t do that.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s for his gran. He can’t leave her not knowing where he is or what he’s doing.”

“You didn’t tell her anything?” Hermione asked. “Does she know we’re not going back to school?”

“She will now. I left her a note about what we’re doing… or that Dumbledore left us with something to do.” Harry said uneasily.

“What do you mean she’ll know now?” Hermione demanded.

“I left her a note,” Harry answered guiltily.

“Harry James Potter! How could you do that!” Hermione scolded.

“There's no way she would have let me out of her sight if I told her what we were doing,” Harry said in his own defense.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest.

“Come on Hermione,” Fred cajoled, “You know Harry’s right.”

“That wasn’t very nice Harry,” Hermione said in the same disapproving manner.

“I don’t know what else to do,” Harry sighed.

“Enough of that,” George said trying to ease the tension. “So, what’s next? Where are those Horcruxes?”

Harry told the twins about the necklace, Kreacher and Regulus, how the elf was searching for Mundungus and stolen necklace, the arrival of the twins gave Harry and Hermione things to do while they waited for Kreacher to return with the thief. Harry called Dobby to give him the mirror to Luna. The mirror would do him little good while they were on the run but if the girl was in danger she could call on Remus for help. Harry knew the werewolf would do all he could to help her.

It was a week before the house elf returned with a furious Mundungus Fletcher. The hound-dog
faced wizard no longer had the necklace it was taken from him by Dolores Umbridge. “How are we going to break into the Ministry of Magic?” Harry asked as Mundungus left. “We would have to be the luckiest people alive to do that successfully.” Fred snickered.

“What’s so funny about that Fred,” Hermione asked.

“It’s a good thing that we started brewing a batch of Felix Felicis,” Fred answered with a cocky grin.

“Felix takes six months to be prepare,” Hermione reminded them.

“Ahh…well after Ron nearly kicked it in March we figure we thought we might have used all the luck our family was allotted for this war,” George explained.

“You started brewing it in March,” Harry asked astonished.

“Yes,” Fred confirmed. “It should be done the first week of September.”

“That’s great,” Harry said with a grin.

“Don’t you think we would be doing something before we try to break into the Ministry?” Hermione asked.

“Like what,” Harry asked.

“We need to figure out a way to destroy the Horcrux once we get hold of it,” the girl suggested.

“We can’t just depend on luck mate,” Fred added. “We’ll need to come up with a plan on how to get into the Ministry.”

“She’s still the Under Secretary for the Minister of Magic,” George added. “You know she will be deep in the Ministry.”

Harry sighed. “What do you think we should do?”

“We’ll need to find out what is going on in the world,” Hermione answered instantly.

“We can’t exactly have The Daily Prophet delivered here,” Harry protested.

“We can nick copies from the Ministry folks, pick up the day-old issues from the trash,” Fred answered. “Lee Jordan is running a radio station too.”

“Lee’s running a radio station,” Hermione repeated confused.

“He’s going to talk about what the Order is doing to resist You-Know-Who and things,” George clarified.

“How is that going to work?” Harry asked with a furrowed brow. “If he’s running a radio station doesn’t that mean anyone of the Death Eaters can find out what they’re planning?”

Fred shook his head, “You have to know the frequency before you can tune in, then there’s a password you have to say too before you can listen.”

“How do you get the password,” Hermione asked curiously.

“It’s at the end of every show,” explained Fred.
“That’s interesting,” Hermione said.

The four decided they would have to use the Polyjuice to sneak into the Ministry. They would break in after the Felix was ready. In the meantime, Hermione began brewing the Polyjuice so it would be ready to go when the twins’ Felix was complete.

“Can you believe that slimy git is taking Dumbledore’s place?” Fred demanded, clearly disgusted.

“You-Know-Who thinks he’s one of his most loyal followers,” Hermione pointed out. “He’s been in the school for eighteen years. An experienced teacher is a better choice than someone who has never worked in the school.”

“He killed Dumbledore,” George objected. “He is a loyal follower. He played us all. None of the professors are going to trust him.”

Harry said nothing, not trusting himself to speak.

“Are you alright mate,” Fred asked spotting the look on Harry’s face.

“Fine,” Harry said pushing away from the table. “I think I’m going to have a lie-down.”

Harry wandered upstairs. He lay on his bed staring up at the faded green and silver hanging on his bed.

There was a knock on his door, “Can I come in?” Hermione was at his door.

“Yeah,” Harry said scooching over to give her a place to sit.


“No…Yes…” Harry said pushing his hair back away from his eyes.

“You don’t think he should be Headmaster?” Hermione suggested.

“George is right, none of the professors are going to trust him,” Harry began.

“But you still do,” Hermione observed.

“You weren’t there Hermione. You don’t know what happened. You don’t know everything that I do.” Harry said with a soft sigh.

“Then tell me. That’s why we’re all here. You’re mad at Dumbledore for not telling you everything you needed to know. Do you want to do the same thing?” She asked.

“This is different,” Harry objected.


“It has to be me. I’m the one that will have to face You-Know-Who in the end. I know everything that I need to,” Harry explained.

“And the rest of us don’t deserve to know the same,” Hermione asked pointedly.

“No,” Harry said sitting up. “It’s not like that. It’s just…it’s like with Mrs. Weasley or Mrs. Longbottom. They need to know that we’re doing something Dumbledore left us to do, but if we told them more they would be in danger.”
“And here I was thinking you didn’t tell Mum what we were up to because you were scared she’d be mad at you,” Fred said leaning casually on the door.

“By the guilty look on his face, I’d say that’s part of it, Fred,” George said standing behind his brother. “Harry, you’ve seen the papers. You are Undesirable Number One, wanted for questioning in the death of Albus Dumbledore. I would bet my last knut that makes Hermione Undesirable Number Two. Me and Fred, we’ve got to be pretty high on that list too if they even suspect we are on the run with you. If we get caught, we’re dead already.”

“Don’t say that,” Hermione scolded.

Harry sighed. George was right. He would have to tell them something. They were putting their lives in danger, just as much as he was.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione said gently placing a hand on Harry’s knee.

Harry took a deep breath before speaking. “Professor Snape…” Harry began.

“What about the slimy git,” Fred snapped standing up right.

Harry shook his head. “Don’t call him that. Dumbledore, he knew, he knew he was dying. His hand was cursed after he put on You-Know-Who’s ring. Professor Snape helped to contain the curse but he couldn’t stop it. Dumbledore asked him to kill him...when the time came. He didn’t want to do it. Dumbledore didn’t want to die at the hands of a Death Eater… for Malfoy to become a killer…”

“Oh my,” Hermione breathed softly.

“You said it,” Fred agreed.

Hermione came up with a schedule for each of the four of them they took turns using the Invisibility Cloak to watch the entrance to the Ministry watching the coming and goings of the Ministry officials as they arrived in the morning and left in the evenings.

All employees were now being forced to enter the Ministry to enter via a new guest entrance. Muggle-borns were being forced to register. Snape was the newly appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts.

The four of them needed to find members that arrived at a similar time each day and left at a similar time. Fred and George had the first several turns as they knew many people who worked in the building from coming to work with their father and licensing their own products. Hermione didn’t want to mistakenly replace a high-level official and get pulled into an important meeting and lose the little time they would have under cover with Polyjuice Potion.

The four of them practiced defensive magic for at least two hours a day preparing for any sort of battle that might occur if their plans didn’t work out. The Felix required more attention as it grew closer to the last stages of completion. Fred and George were taking turns monitoring its condition. They were already lucky the Death Eaters had not found it when they conducted the search of the shop. After their practice sessions, they would listen to Lee’s radio program that now always included in the list of the most recently fallen.

As September first drew closer Harry’s mood darkened. The Ministry under the control of Voldemort now required all children of half-blood or better status attend Hogwarts. Harry knew friends were in heading into danger and he could not help.

Harry was in a particularly bad mood the last night of August. His scar ached with Voldemort’s anger, over what Harry was uncertain. He went upstairs to take a bath to relax his sore muscles
intentionally missing Lee’s nightly broadcast. When he came down stairs, the looks on his friends’ faces told him something was wrong.

“What is it,” Harry demanded without preamble.

“You might want to take a seat mate,” George advised.

“What is it,” Harry repeated unmoving.

“Harry,” Hermione said softly.

“Was is on the list,” Harry demanded.

Fred nodded.


Hermione shook her head. “No, Remus is fine as far as we know.”

“Hagrid,” Harry guessed.

“No mate,” Fred said. “It’s your family.”

“The Dursleys,” Harry said confused, “What about them?”

“The Order was trying to move them to safety. They thought the Death Eaters might want to kidnap them to use them as leverage or something.” Fred explained.

“They’re Muggles. What could they possibly know,” Harry asked dumbly. “Are they okay?”

“The Death Eaters were waiting for the Order there was a battle. Amelia Bones was killed. The house burned down,” continued Fred.


“They’re all gone, Harry,” Hermione said softly.

“Why,” demanded Harry numbly. “I haven’t spoken to them in years. They didn’t even like me…”

“I’m so sorry Harry,” Hermione said hugging her friend.

“You all need to go,” Harry said standing up.

“Go,” Hermione repeated.

“Go,” Harry insisted. “I can’t let you come with me. I’m putting you all and your families at too much risk. I have no one left.”

“Don’t talk rubbish,” George ordered. “You have plenty of family, Harry. When will you get that through your thick head you’re one of us.”

“Besides,” Fred added, “Mum would kill us if she found out we let you run off to play the hero by yourself. She’d murder you too for being an idiot. A noble idiot is still an idiot.”

“Hermione,” Harry begged. “What about your parents?”

“They’re safe. They… they don’t know where I am. They don’t even realize they have a
daughter.” Hermione said her voice becoming choked with emotion.

“What do you mean they don’t know they have a daughter,” George asked the girl.

“I wanted them to be safe. I wanted to make sure that they didn’t know anything that might put them in danger.” Hermione explained. “They think their names are Wendell and Monica Jones and their life’s ambition was to move to Australia, which they’ve done. If I survive the war, I’ll go and lift the enchantment and return them to who they used to be. If I don’t, I hope they’ll be happy.”

“Hermione,” Harry said stunned by the length his friend would go to protect those she loved.

“Just make it worth it,” Hermione said poking him in the chest with it each word.

Harry sighed and nodded.

Harry watched the mantle clock as it ticked past eleven o’clock the next morning. For the first time in seven years, he was not at King’s Cross Station. The twins were at the shop working on the position. Hermione was reading on something or other. Harry spent the day stewing waiting for some sort of news, his eyes on the Marauder’s Map waiting for names to appear on it.

“What are you doing Harry,” Hermione asked when she found him the in the library around dinner.

Harry motioned to the map, “Just waiting to see they got there safely.”

Hermione pulled out her DA coin. “Neville sent a message that the train was searched, they were looking for you. Everyone is fine.”

Harry sighed in relief. Then removed his coin from the pouch around his neck. It was blank. “Why didn’t he message me as well?”

“Oh, he didn’t? We talk sometimes, Harry. You must know that,” Hermione said trying to sound casual but the blush creeping its way into her cheeks betrayed her.

At least his friends should be safe once more inside the protective wards of Hogwarts.
Harry flipped ideally through the pages of the copy of *Hogwarts A History* Hermione had lent him to read as she studied *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* yet again. "Is there something specific I should be looking for?" Harry asked as his eyes danced away from the text for what had to have been the hundredth time in the last half hour.

"Anything about Godric Gryffindor or his sword," Hermione said, her eyes never leaving the book in front of her.

Harry sighed and went back to reading as she flipped further into the text. His eyes fell on a promising passage. "The sword of Godric Gryffindor is believed to have been forged by the well-known goblin armorer, Gooblidin the Bloody in 890 AD. The wizard is reported to have paid the goblin over a thousand Galleons for the commission of the sword. It took the goblin over a year to craft it."

Harry got Hermione's attention, reading her the section he had just read to himself. Hermione hummed in consideration of the new information.

"Is there something important there," Harry asked as he read the information once again.

"Perhaps," Hermione agreed. "The sword is goblin made. The sword will only take in what will make it stronger. It will have been impregnated with basilisk venom from what happened down in the Chamber of Secrets." Harry nodded along in agreement as Hermione continued to speak, even if it was mostly to herself. "That must be why Dumbledore left it to Neville."

"Why's that," Harry asked, hoping she didn't think it was a foolish question.

"From everything I've read there are very few ways to destroy a Horcrux," Hermione explained. "The piece of soul is dependent on the survival of the container to preserve its continued existence. It will resist its destruction." Harry recalled the way the memory of Tom Riddle from the diary had tried to kill him when he was twelve years old. "The Horcrux must be damaged beyond repair for the Horcrux to be completely destroyed basilisk venom is one of the few ways to do this as it only has one antidote."

"Phoenix tears," Harry said running a hand over where the basilisk fang once penetrated his arm. "Well, that makes some sense to why he left Neville the sword. He would have assumed he would be with us on this hunt."

"Indeed," agreed Hermione.

"It's ready," Fred announced that evening after dinner.

"Are you sure?" asked Hermione looking up from the copy of *Beedle the Bard* that lay across her lap.

"You don't trust us?" George said clearly offended.

"I do," Hermione insisted.
George crossed his arms over his chest.

"You two have made new potions. That's something I would never dare to do," Hermione explained.

"We stuck to the recipe," Fred told her.

Harry didn't miss how her shoulders relaxed a fraction at the statement. Harry hadn't offered the twins the use of Snape's old potions text. The twins were still angry at the Potions Master for the death of Dumbledore. He feared what they might do with one of his possession if given the opportunity.

"When do we go," Harry asked anxiously. They had been trapped in Grimmauld Place for nearly a month. The few hours of escape under the Invisibility Cloak watching the entrance to the Ministry doing little to relieve Harry's restlessness.

"I want to check the potions supplies before we try anything," Hermione said putting her book away.

"I am overwhelmed in your confidence in us, Hermione," Fred remarked.

"It's more than the Felix. I want to make sure we have enough Polyjuice, healing potions if something goes wrong," Hermione said distractedly. Harry could almost see the mental list she was ticking off in her mind.

Fred turned to his twin, "If I didn't know any better, I would say our Hermione is scared."

"Yes," Hermione admitted. "We are going to break into the Ministry of Magic, Fred. Do you have any idea what could happen if this goes poorly?"

"We could die," Fred said calmly. There was not a single trace of humor or a joke accompanying the statement. "It's war, Hermione. If you want to stay safe, go and hide in the Muggle world with your parents. I plan to fight."

"I didn't say I didn't want to fight," Hermione snapped back at the boy. "I want to be smart about this. There is no reason to put yourselves in unnecessary danger."

"What do you suggest we do?" Harry asked.

"Test the potions before we use them for the break in," Hermione said instantly.

"Test them, like we try sneaking in twice?" Harry asked unsure what his friend meant.

"Possibly," Hermione agreed.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Harry asked. "Slughorn said it was a bad idea to abuse Felix it can lead to giddiness and reckless behavior."

"I don't plan to abuse it, Harry," Hermione said defensively.

"You have no idea how this might play out Hermione," Harry said with a shake of his head. He had given the remainder of his vial of the potion to his friends before he left with Dumbledore for the cave. The potion may have saved the lives of his friends. That was a bit different than when Harry had used it to get the memories from Slughorn. Harry hadn't really understood what lead him to
make the choices he did under its influence. He would never have gone to the greenhouses hoping to run into the Potions professor.

"What if Fred and I test them, not breaking into the Ministry, something a little..." George drifted off uncertainly.

"Less likely to get us killed," Fred finished.

"And what would you suggest?" Demanded a now clearly irritated Hermione.

"Hogsmeade," Harry interjected cutting of whatever George was going to snap back.

"What could they possibly accomplish in Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. "The professors go down to the village. Maybe we could learn what's happening in the school. Or maybe they'll be able to see Neville, or Ginny, or..."

"Luna," finished Hermione for him. "Harry, we all have people we would like to see."

"Have you got a better suggestion," asked George as he spun his wand idly through his fingers.

Hermione sighed, "I haven't but it seems like a waste of perfectly good potion."

"That's the thing, we don't know if it is a perfectly good potion," George reminded her. "If we did it right, maybe we get a bit of information that helps us in the long run. If we bullocked it up, well, me and Fred wasted six months of our lives..."

"Fine," conceded Hermione. "You two can take a sample and see what you can get from a visit to Hogsmeade."

Fred had an unexpected wicked grin on his face. "I'm sure you won't regret this Hermione."

"I'm sure," Hermione agreed with absolutely no confidence.

The twins decided they would take a small dose enough for a couple of hours of luck the following evening so that if professors were visiting the village it would be after they finished with classes for the day. They spent much of the morning talking about where the other Horcruxes might be. Could they be in the orphanage You-Know-Who grew up in? Perhaps it was in Albania where he spent much of his time in exile hiding?

The afternoon was spent in their usual time working on practical defensive magic. Harry still on occasion had problems with his nonverbal spells when he was angry or frustrated. Hermione's continued scolding did little to improve his temper or skill. He was glad the twins leaving gave him an excuse to take a go upstairs, away from the girl. He was in his room trying to make headway in *David Copperfield*, a book that he hadn't remember leaving on the nightstand when they were here when it was the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Try as he might, he could not get his brain to take in the misfortunes of Mr. Micawber and his family.

"Harry," Hermione called.

Harry rolled over, he must have fallen asleep. He had been walking down the lane of a small village somewhere on the continent. There were mountains that were most certainly not in Britain.
Voldemort was looking for something. The woman hadn't had it and didn't know where it or the person might be. Harry had woken to a flash of green light.

"Harry are you alright," Hermione asked more gently this time. She stood by the edge of his bed, pushing back the sweat damp fringe on his forehead.

"I'm fine," Harry said pushing her hand away.

"You don't look it," Hermione said taking in his pale, sweaty features. "You were screaming in your sleep. Was it one of your nightmares?"

Harry shook his head.

"Harry," Hermione pleaded, "you can tell me."

"Just leave it," Harry grumbled.

"Harry," Hermione said again.

Harry sat up, luckily the world didn't spin too badly as he threw his feet over the side of the bed. "Why did you come in here? Was it because of the screaming?"

"No," Hermione said softly with a shake of her head. "They're back."

"Why didn't you say something before," Harry demanded.

"You didn't look well," Hermione said softly.

Harry ignored her worried look and made for the door. It was only when he was in the hall that he noticed she wasn't following behind him.

"You coming?" Harry called back to her.

"Are we going to discuss what happened to you?" Hermione asked.

"It was nothing Hermione," Harry dismissed.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest.

Harry sighed, "We can talk about it later. Right now let's see what Fred and George were able to get. Those two aren't exactly known for their patience."

Hermione followed him this time. The twins were sitting across from one another at the dinner table in identical positions, their feet on the surface of the table, chairs leaning on their back legs. Each twin had a bottle of butterbeer in their hand. Harry took in the triumphant looks on the identical faces, they must have learned something good.

"Well," Harry demanded.

"Well what," Fred said taking a lazy sip of his butterbeer.

"What did you learn?" Harry said with a great indignant huff.
"Learn," Fred repeated. "Learned that Dolohov does not have the head to pull off the bald look."

George laughed out loud at the statement.

"You used Felix Felicis to play a practical joke!" Hermione looked as if she were on the verge of hexing the both of them.

"Keep your knickers on," George reassured. "That was only a bit of fun after. You can blame it on the remaining effects of the potion if you want."

Hermione was still too angry to speak so Harry asked, "After? After what?"

"This," Fred said pulling something from his trousers’ pocket. The front feet of his dining room chair came back to the ground with a crash as he placed the locket on the gold chain in the center of the table.

Hermione gasped. "That's the locket, the real locket. How in the name of Merlin did you get that?"

George gave her a cocky grin, "We got lucky. We decided that we take our sample of potion right there in the shop. Diagon Alley is almost deserted nowadays but you never know who might be stopping into Gringotts."

"Or Knockturn Alley more like," Fred added.

"Guys," Harry prodded.

"Well, we took our sample of potion and who do we see walk by the door to your humble shop than none other than the Deputy Minister of Magic and Head of Muggle-Born Registration Commission," explained George.

"Umbridge," Hermione breathed. "What was she doing in Diagon Alley?"


"What's important is what happened next," Fred continued. "How could we not follow such an upstanding citizen of the community of wizarding Britain, especially as she seemed to be heading straight for Knockturn Alley. Perhaps she was lost and there are sure disreputable characters down that street. We thought we owed her some useful guidance."

"What do you know, she wasn't too pleased to see us," George said almost sadly. "She tried to pull her wand on us but Fred Disarmed before her wand was out of her pocket. We Stunned her, swapped the necklace for one transfigured out of one of my old socks. We wiped her memory of it all and she went on her merry way, none the wiser."

"And Dolohov?" Hermione said sounding completely unamused, even if it led to their possession of one of the elusive Horcruxes.

"Like we said that was only a bit of fun," Fred said with a shrug. "We still had some time with a little luck. So we went on as planned on to Hogsmeade. Dolohov was there with a couple of Death Eaters that are teaching there now, the Carrows. They were complaining to Dolohov about the wave of resistance Snape was facing from not only the students but the professors."
"People are opposing Snape," Harry asked surprised.

"Oh yeah," Fred said with a grin. "Apparently, our Ginny made some sort of comments during the Welcoming Feast. She got detention from Snape to be served with Filch."

Harry snorted, "That won't be too bad then."

"Nah," agreed Fred. "She won't be alone either."

"Why," Hermione asked curiously as to who else could be causing the leadership of the school this much trouble already."

"Who else would you expect, Neville and Luna of course," George explained. "They lead a cheer for Dumbledore or something like that. I'd love to hear what that great bat had to say about all this."

Hermione gasped in realization and disappeared up the stairs.

"What's with her," Fred asked.

Harry shrugged, "I'm sure she'll tell us." He was right. The girl returned a few minutes later carrying the empty canvas of painting in an elaborate gold frame.

"What are we supposed to do with that?" Harry asked.

"Do you know whose portrait this is?" Hermione asked.

"So old horrible Black family member," Harry said with scathing disapproval. "Why's it matter, Hermione?"

"This is Phineas Nigellus Black," Hermione informed them.

"The worst headmaster Hogwarts ever had," Harry finished remembering the conversation he had once had about the Black family history. "So he'll be able to tell us what's going on in Snape's office."

"I will not," the portrait announced as the subject slide back into his frame. "You little trouble makers have no right to know the coming and goings of the headmaster."

"We need to know where the slimy git is," Fred complained.

"An attitude like that will do you little good," Phineas Nigellus remarked with an air of contempt. "Students always presuming they have rights to know everything as if it were owed to them."

"Snape has something we need, something Dumbledore left to a friend," Harry explained.

"If Dumbledore wished to leave something to any of your friends, Potter, he would have done so," Phineas Nigellus remarked.

"Not if the Ministry stuck their noses in where they didn't belong," objected Fred. "The bastards said Dumbledore couldn't leave it to Harry since it wasn't his to give."

"If you are referring to the Sword of Gryffindor, they are quite right. The sword may present itself to
any worthy member of that foolhardy house." Phineas Nigellus said, his dislike for Gryffindors clear.

"Well, it's already presented itself to Harry once. Shouldn't that be good enough," Hermione asked.

"No," Phineas Nigellus said with a look of boredom.

Harry sighed, "He's not going to help us, Hermione. Put him back."

Hermione glared at the uncooperative painting and instead of taking it back upstairs she shoved it into her beaded bag.

"What you do that for?" Requested Harry over the still audible objects of the portrait's subject.

"You never know when he might be of use," Hermione explained.

"You really think we'll have to stop and have a chat with him at the Ministry of Magic," suggested Fred sarcastically.

"We may have to leave here at some point," Hermione explained. "We should not lose our eyes and ears into what's happening at Hogwarts."

"That's it," Harry said pounding the table vicariously.

"What's it mate," asked a mildly confused George.

"Our eyes and ears into the school," Harry said with a grin, "It's not some grouchy old painting. We've got Neville, Ginny, and Luna."

"Do you think they can help," Hermione asked.

"A painting isn't going to be able to get its hands on the sword for us," Harry explained. "We need a real person for that."

"Do you think it's wise to ask them," Hermione protested. "How are they supposed to get us the sword anyway?"

Harry waved away her objections. "You know they would want to help. They've been there for every time before. We can deal with how they'll get us the sword later."

"So, how do we do it," asked Fred clearly supporting Harry's idea.

Harry retrieved the DA coin from the sack Hagrid gave him on his birthday, "With this."

Harry sent the message on the three coins, "Need Gryffindor Sword. HP"

The coin grew warm in Harry's hand, "Soon. NL"

"What's he mean by that," George asked as Harry read the boy's response out loud to the others.

Harry shrugged uncertainly, "He's going to try and get it soon."

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It had been over a week since Harry had sent the message to the three members of the inner circle that reminded at Hogwarts. He had not received any further information as to their plans for the task Harry had set them.

There was a sound of someone at the front door.

"Who the bloody Hell could that be?" Fred demanded, looking up as if he could see through the floor to the front door.

Harry did not respond but grabbed his wand and ran up the stairs. He was at the top in time to heard a familiar raspy voice tell the grey cloud Dumbledore he was not its murderer. Still, Harry did not drop his wand.

"Who are you," Harry demanded.

"It's me, Remus," the werewolf said, "I am the last remaining Marauder, Moony of the creators of the Marauder’s Map, the husband of Nymphadora often known as Tonks."

Harry lowered his wand. He was unable to resist and launched himself at the man. The werewolf did not flinch as he pulled the young man into a tight embrace. He was just as glad to see Harry as the Harry was to see him.

"What are you doing here," Harry asked as he stepped away from his father's only remaining friend.

Remus motioned for them to head downstairs and to rejoin the others who had stayed behind in the kitchen. Harry followed behind him. He noticed there was a stiffness in the older man's movements that he had not noticed before. Harry could not think when the last full moon was, the aches of transformation normally taking a toll on Remus' wellbeing.

"Remus," Hermione greeted excitedly.

"Hello Hermione, Fred, George," Remus responded as he took a seat at the table.

Harry busied himself as he made tea.

"What's going on?" Fred asked.

"How is Mum?" requested George.

Remus held up his hand to stop the triad of questions. "Your mother is fine. Bill and Fleur are still working at the bank at the moment. I believe Charlie has returned to Romania for the moment."

"And Percy," George asked.

"Is still working at the Ministry," Remus answered uneasily.

"What," the twins cried in unison.

"The Ministry is in the hands of You-Know-Who," Hermione objected.

"It is," agreed Remus. "Percy believes that it is important that the Order have someone on the inside
of the Ministry."

"How does Mrs. Weasley feel about that?" Harry asked.

"I don't believe Molly was very pleased. She is worried about Percy's safety. However, he is not the child that is causing her the most distress at the moment."

"He's not," Harry said in disbelief.

Remus nodded. "Ginny and Ron were apprehended along with Neville and Luna trying to steal the Sword of Gryffindor from Snape's office."

"Oh no," Hermione breathed.

"Are they okay," Harry asked anxiously.

Remus nodded, "They received detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He seemed to be the only one to do so.

"Detention with Hagrid," Fred asked skeptically.

"That is what we were told," Remus confirmed.

"That's it," George sounded as confused as his brother. "That's hardly a punishment. They probably just had a laugh."

"It is rather unexpected," Remus conceded. Not all of the werewolf's new was good though. "As a result of the attempted burglary, the sword is being moved to Gringotts. We assume it is being placed in the Lestrange vault since it was Rodolphus that retrieved it from the headmaster's office."

There was a muttering of displeasure through the group of young people at this development.

"Why are you here Remus," Harry asked. The man's company was not unappreciated but Harry did find it unsettling. There was something Remus wasn't telling them. Harry needed to know what it was.

"I have come to offer my services on your mission," Remus said stiffly.

"What do you mean," Harry asked confused.

"It's clear that Dumbledore left something for you to achieve. I have come to offer my assistance. I am somewhat of an expert in the Dark Arts. You are likely to run across magic you can't have ever dreamed of," Remus explained. "You won't have to tell me what the mission is, only the basic outline of what we need to accomplish."

"What about Tonks?" Hermione asked. "You're only just married."

"She will be safe at her parents," Remus said shifting awkwardly in his seat.

"At her parents," George repeated. "Why will she be there? Doesn't she want to fight?"
"Of course, she does," Remus confirmed, "but Tonks is going to have a baby."

"That's wonderful Remus," Hermione squealed excitedly.

"Congratulations mate," George said with a grin.

"Good on you, Remus," Fred said with a grin to match his brother.

Harry was the only one to not offer his congratulations. "You're going to be a dad and you want to come with us? How can you even think about coming with us?"

"I should never have married Tonks. I did it with great reservations. I am not the idea of what parents want their only daughter to bring home. Now... my kind doesn't normally reproduce. At best I will be a source of embarrassment and ridicule. What if I have doomed them to a life of pain and rejection?" Remus' voice rose in panic as he spoke, pulling his hair. The agitated face was almost deranged.

"So this is your plan, run away and leave them to fend for themselves?" Harry snapped in disapproval.

"Harry, James would want me to help you," Remus argued.

"Bullshit," Harry snapped back. "My dad died trying to save me. He did everything thing he could to stay with us." With a heavy note of disapproval, Harry said, "I never thought you could be such a coward."

"How dare you," Remus hissed, his wand in his hand.

"How dare you," Harry yelled his own wand drawn. "You want to run away from your responsibilities and relive your glory days. You don't want your kid to be embarrassed of you. Fine, who wouldn't be embarrassed of someone who ran when they found out the news they were going to be parents?"

"I won't be treated like this," Remus said storming up the stairs.
"Remus, come back," Hermione called following him to the front door but wasn't able to catch him.  "He's gone," Hermione informed Harry with a disapproving huff as she took her seat at the table.

"Good," Harry said with a nod. "I hope he goes back to Tonks. Parents shouldn't leave their kids, not when you have a choice."

"Agreed," Fred said sadly.

"You didn't have to be so mean about it," Hermione chastised.
George shook his head, "Nah, Harry said what needed to be said. I reckon Remus wouldn't have taken in anything less than what he was just told. Dad might have said it a bit differently but the point would have been the same."

Hermione looked from George to Fred.

"Definitely," Fred confirmed, "Now back to what Remus said about the sword."

"What about it," Harry demanded his mind still on Remus' news.
"The Sword of Gryffindor, the only way we know how to destroy these Horcruxes is now being moved to Gringotts. Am I the only one who sees a problem with this?" Fred asked his voice missing any note of humor.

"The only place that might be harder to break into is the Ministry of Magic," George sighed.

"Then it's a good thing we have an entire cauldron of Liquid Luck waiting for us," Hermione said with a devious smile.
Fred and George looked at one another.

"You know George, I think we may have been a bad influence on her," Fred said uneasily.

"I think you might be right," agreed his twin.

Harry sat at the head of the table as they poured over their notes on what they had been able to learn from the observations of the security procedures at Gringotts. The goblins were doing their best to stay out of the wizard's' war. However, the proud creatures did not approve of some of the things the new Ministry was requesting of them.

"Is there any chance Bill could help us get in touch with some of the bank goblin’s," Hermione asked a few days into watching the bank.

"I don’t know," Fred said uneasily, “Why would you want to talk to them?”

"Last year he said he goblins were trying to stay out of the wizard’s war," Hermione told him.

"What good does that do us," Harry asked looking up from *David Copperfield*.

"If the goblins are not actively siding with You-Know-Who there is a possibility that some might be willing to help us. We all know how he treats creatures that he finds unworthy of his respect, that is everything that is not a Pureblood wizard,” Hermione’s voice was thick with contempt.

"That’s a good idea,” George agreed. “Now we just need to figure out a way to talk to Bill without getting us all killed.”

It took another few days to figure out how they would be able to safely communicate their eldest brother. George had worn the Invisibility Cloak had slipped a note into Bill’s pocket as he walked back to the Leaky Cauldron to Floo home after work. It requested that he Apparate to headquarters that evening. The way the note was worded it would make almost no sense if it were discovered by anyone else. Even members of the Order would not have been able to figure out was meant with all of the Weasley family references.

The familiar sound of the shadow of Dumbledore demanding to know if it was his murder entering the house activated letting the residents know their company had arrived. All had wands in their hands as they went down the hall to greet their guest.
“Who is it,” Fred demanded.

“It’s Bill,” Bill answered stepping into the light of the hallway.

“Prove it,” Harry demanded.

Bill paused uncertainly what the teen wanted him to say to do this.

“When we were about four or five me and Fred locked Percy in the attic with the ghoul,” George began.

“Mum nearly tanned your hinds,” Bill agreed.

George nodded.

“Why did we lock him in there,” Fred requested.

Bill frowned trying to remember the incident. “Percy was mad you two had taken something of his and he tried to get it back. He couldn’t because you had locked it up somehow. He got me to help him get it back and I fell, cracked my head open on Dad’s desk. Percy told Mum the whole thing. She made you two stand in a corner or something. You didn’t care about that part. It was Percy whining to Mum that bugged you.”

Fred accepted his answer, lowered his wand and said, “Hey Bill.”

Bill nodded his head in return to in younger brother, “Bit nervous.”

“Can’t be too careful,” Harry answered seriously.

Bill nodded his head again, “Of course. In your note, you said you wanted to talk about the bank.”

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed. He led the group down the stairs into the kitchen.

“We need to break into Gringotts,” Harry said as set out the tea a few minutes later.

Bill went pale. “You’re absolutely mad. It can’t be done. You’ll be caught instantly, killed probably. If Mum thought I had anything to do with it, she’d kill me too.”

“We have to,” Harry insisted.

“No,” Bill said firmly.

“Bill,” Hermione said a bit more softly. “We need to get in the bank, there is something we need.”

“Why,” Bill demanded.

“We can’t tell you,” Harry answered.

Hermione spoke again, “We can’t tell you in detail. We can say that without it, we will not be able to defeat You-Who-Know.”

“And it’s in Gringotts,” Bill asked.
“In the Lestrange vault,” Hermione confirmed.

“Fuck,” Bill cursed under his breath.

“What’s wrong with that,” George asked.

“I thought you mad for saying you wanted to break into the bank, to begin with, but to try and get into a high-security vault, well you might as well ask to fly to the moon on thestral wings,” Bill said leaning back in to look at the ceiling.

“If we told you we had Polyjuice Potion would that help,” Hermione asked.

“The Chudley Cannons still have a better chance of coming out on the top of the league,” Bill said mirthlessly.

“What if we had a luck on our side,” Fred asked.

Bill shook his head, “Even the all the luck in the world will only get you so far. You would need the help of half the staff of the bank to get out of there undetected.”

“Is there a chance we could get it,” Fred asked hopefully.

“Not a chance,” Bill said sourly. “We could maybe get three or four to help us. If they were in the right position maybe they can get you down to the vault. The problem is getting back out. There’s only one way in or out of the vaults. You’ll have passed all of the security measures to get to the high-security vaults.” The curse breaker sighed. “Let me think about it a couple of days. Maybe let me talk to a few of the goblins.”

The look on her face showed Hermione’s disapproval at this but she said nothing.

“If you want even a snowball’s chance let me do what I need to,” Bill said to the girl. She nodded.

He rose from the table. “I’ll come back in a few days when I have talked to who I need to.”

“We’ll see you then,” Harry agreed walking their guest to the door.

As promised Bill returned a few days later.

“Are they going to help us,” “What did you find out,” Fred and George demanded of their brother.

Bill held up a hand to silence them. “I found a few goblins that are willing to help. It is still going to be incredibly risky. I can’t promise you any sort of success either.”

“What do we need to do,” Harry asked.

“You will need not only to get a sample of one of the Lestranges but their wand as well,” Bill began.

Hermione breathed deeply at this.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Bill warned her. “Harry has to be the one to do the next part.”

“Why me,” Harry demanded.
“There are many protections in the bank to prevent thefts, things that remove all forms of concealment, including Polyjuice. Goblins may think we all look alike but even they know what Harry Potter, “Undesirable No. 1” looks like. That scar is the key to getting them to help you,” Bill explained.

“How are they going to know it’s me before that,” Harry asked.

“You are to walk to the front counter and demanded to see Gorgar, he’s one of the goblins in charge of high-security vaults. Then you will tell him you need to remove a very important family heirloom,” Bill instructed.

Hermione’s hand was racing across a parchment in front of her taking down all the instructions in detail.

“Gorgar will take you down to the appropriate vault and let you in.” Bill paused, “He won’t help you to find what you are looking for thought.”

“We know what we’re looking for,” Harry said trying to reassure the eldest Weasley child.

“I still think you’re all mad to try this. You’ll need all the luck you can get,” Bill informed them.

“We have a whole cauldron full of Felix Felicis,” George told him truthfully.

“If I were you, I would drink the whole lot before you tried this,” Bill said with a shake of his head, his long ponytail bouncing back and forth on his shoulders.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Harry said with an uneasy chuckle.

Bill left them a short time later wishing them all luck. He hoped he would see them all soon. He was sure he would hear how things went as soon as it happened, if not then, on the front page of The Daily Prophet.

“We need to be careful with the Felix Felicis,” Hermione said as the twins handed her a copy of the people they had seen coming and going from the bank on a regular basis several days after Bill’s last visit.

“What do you mean,” Fred asked.

“If you take too much of it, it can lead to giddiness, overly reckless behavior,” Hermione explained. “I think it would be better if I took the next dose.” She quickly added, “Along with Harry of course. Neither of us has taken any since last year.”

“Fine,” the twins agreed simultaneously.

“We need the hair of a Lestrange to get into their vault,” Harry stated.

“I am aware of that Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“We haven’t ever seen any of them at the bank,” Harry protested.

“That’s possibly a good thing as they can’t have mistaken the real Lestrange for you yet,” Hermione
said trying to sound optimistic, though it didn’t work very well. She rested her head in her hand, "Perhaps we are looking for them in the wrong place," Hermione suggested.

Harry frowned at the statement. "What do you mean?"
"There might be a place we could find a wizard of their dark inclination," Hermione said setting aside the stack of notes.

Harry's puzzled expression did not ease.

"Knockturn Alley," Fred translated for Harry. "We've got a pretty good view of the entrance to the shop if they're turning onto the street from Diagon Alley."

"How many people are doing that nowadays," George mumbled.

Fred shrugged off his brother's comment. "We can set the wards around the shop to monitor for one of the Lestranges. We get a bit of hair or something from one of them and then we use it to walk into the bank no questions asked."

"As easy as all that?" Hermione asked in complete disbelief.

"Yep," Fred said with a cocky grin.

The twins had a number of wards around the shop already. Turning the wizard on the sign for Weasley Wizard Wheezes to alert the residents of Number Twelve that a member of the Lestrange family was in the area was only a matter of fine tuning. Harry was surprised at little work it took the twins to set it up. In the meantime, they tried everything they could think of to try and destroy the Horcrux in their possession. Their efforts were in vain but it made them feel as if they were doing something while they waited.

The discussion of where the other Horcruxes might be was also a frequent topic of discussion. They tried to think of any possible locations it could be located from what Harry had learned from Dumbledore. The others refused to believe that You-Know-Who could have possibly left one in Hogwarts, despite Harry's insistence that it made the most sense. Harry understood how the castle had been the first true home Tom Riddle had ever known.

The quartet visited the site where the orphanage Tom lived at once stood. It was now a towering office block. There was nothing there.

When Harry became frustrated with his companions he would retreat to his room with the copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* that Bathilda Bagshot gave him at the wedding. The book had raised many questions in Harry's mind. There was so much Dumbledore had not told Harry. The headmaster was not the man Harry had thought he had been.

The old wizard had been close friends with Gerhart Grindelwald when he was Harry's age. The two young men had talked about bringing the magical world out of hiding. The Muggle world would be the subjects of this new all powerful wizarding society. They said it would be for 'the greater good'. This is not what interested Harry the most. It was the laughing face of the future dark wizard.

The face of Grindelwald had haunted his nightmares of late. You-Know-Who had been trying to locate the wizard. As a young man the wizard had stolen something from the wandmaker Gregorovitch. You-Know-Who had killed the wandmaker already. Why he would do so confused Harry. He had asked his fellows but none had a possible answer.
The alarms to the ward around the store alerted them as they ate breakfast a little over a week after they were set. Everyone grabbed their wands, their cloak, Harry had his Invisibility Cloak with him as he always did. Harry and Hermione took long swallows of the luck potion before silently signalling for Hermione to act.

Hermione opened the door to the shop stepping out into the street undisguised. She whistled at the tall, unattractive Death Eater to get his attention. The wizard stared at her as she moved back toward the boarded up store. He followed her into the shop completely oblivious to the presence of the three other wizards in the room. Rodolphus Lestrange hit the floor with a heavy thump.

Hermione swooped down and plucked a few hairs from his head before adding them to a cup of Polyjuice. The muddy potion turned an unpleasant shade of grey-green with the addition. Hermione held out the cup to Harry.

"Hurry," she urged, "I don't know how long his absence will go unnoticed."

Fred passed a set of robes that should fit Harry in the bigger body his would become after the potion. Harry nodded his thanks as he disappeared into the back of the change. Harry slugged back a few swallows of the foul tasting concoction, a mixture of bad eggs and cabbage. He remembered the odd bubbling sensation his skin had from when they took the potion in second year. He had forgotten the momentary pain as his body was forced to grow taller and wider to match Lestrange's imposing figure. The transformation complete Harry returned to the main room of the shop.

"You should leave now," Harry advised in Lestrange's deep voice. "I'll meet you at home when I have the sword."

"Are you sure you don't want one of to come," Hermione asked once again.

Harry insisted, "You can't, I have to be the one to go remember? I'll be fine, Hermione." He took the abducted wizard's wand and gripped it tightly in his hand. The unfamiliar bit of wood felt awkward in his large hairy hands.

Not to waste any further time Harry walked purposely out the door. He made sure not to run to ensure he did not draw any unnecessary attention to himself. He held his head high and glared at anyone who dared look at him too long. He did his best to ignore the posters of his own true face staring at him from what felt like every window. Each poster titled with the words "Undesirable No. 1", the captured with the promised reward of ten thousand galleons for Harry Potter's capture.

Harry climbed the stairs of the bank with ease, taking them two or three at a time. A goblin opened the door for him. He ignored the long faced creature as if it did not exist, Lestrange would never acknowledge a being he considered to be beneath him.

The bank was empty compared to any other time Harry had visited it. His heavy footfalls echoing off the stone walls. He walked up the counter at the end of the long chamber.

"What do you require," demanded the hook-nosed goblin standing behind the counter.

“I need to speak with Gorgar,” Harry told the goblin in front of him. The creature shuffled off and returned a moment later he returned with a goblin Harry assume was Gorgar. Harry thought the new goblin was older. He had a large burn scar on his face. Harry wondered what could have caused it.
“How can I help you today Master Lestrange,” the goblin said in a low growl.

"I need to retrieve a valuable heirloom from my family's vaults," Harry tried to sound intimidating.

The goblin gave him an appeasing look. "Present your wand as confirmation of identity Mr. Lestrange."

Harry turned over the foreign wand glad to have it out of his hand for the moment. The wand had an unpleasant feel to it like mild electrical current. Harry preferred the warm sensation that accompanied the use of his own holly and phoenix wand. The goblin placed the wand in a machine that analysed the wand, like the one the wizard at the security desk had used when Mr. Weasley took Harry to his trial before fifth year. The goblin must have accepted the findings of the machine as he snapped for another goblin to take his place at the counter.

“I will escort Mr. Lestrange to his vault,” Gorgar told his fellow goblin.

Harry thought the creature looked slightly surprised by that. He did his best to keep his expression calm. Harry followed Gorgar down into the vaults.

As the small cart rocketed down the tracks Harry wished he had thought to check the potions kit Remus had given him for a Stomach Calming Draught. In all his trips to the bank, he had never gone down without taking one before hand. He fought back the wave of nausea as they came around another sharp curve. Deeper and deeper they went into the bank, deeper than he had ever been before.

"What's that," Harry demanded of the goblin driver pointing at the waterfall that was rapidly approaching.

"The Thief's Falls, it removes all magical concealment. There is no way to avoid it," the goblin warned. The cart passed through the falls the cart crashed into the wall in front of them. Harry and Gorgar fell, the ground racing toward them. The goblin must have done something to slow their fall as they landed safely on their feet a moment later.

“The bank does not let harm come to their employees at the hands of a thief, Mr. Potter,” Gorgar said looking up at Harry, his eyes fixed on the lightning bolt scar.

“That's good I guess,” Harry said uncertainly.

“He might wish it did if the thief were to be successful," Gorgar said threateningly.

Harry frowned, “Then why are you helping me?”

“We want nothing to do with your war,” Gorgar said it with clear disgust. “The other one, the one you fight demands things of us that are below our noble race. I aide you so that we will be returned to our rightful place and be left to our own business.”

“The staff will be alerted there is someone down here under false pretenses. We must hurry.”

Harry nodded, “I understand.”

“You do not,” Gorgar said contemptuously, “but that is not important. Follow me.”
They walked down several long tunnels. It was very dark, Harry had a very hard time seeing where he was going. There was a sound almost like wind blowing coming from nearby. Harry wondered where it was coming from. As they rounded the next corner, his question was answered.

There lay a huge dragon, a two-foot wide metal collar around its long scared neck. There were heavy cuffs attached to long chains anchored into the ground around the creature's rear feet as well. The beast's eyes were covered in a filmy white but it raised its head at the sound of the approaching cart. Several goblins sat around a table waiting for them. They drew closer one of the goblins handed large bells to Gorgar. The dragon reared back at the sound. It must have come to associate the sound with pain. Aunt Marge had talked about training dogs the same way.

Gorgar led Harry to the Lestrange vault running a single finger down the lock to open it. He stepped inside, the door still open.

“I will not help you locate the item which you seek, Mr. Potter,” Gorgar reminded Harry.

“I know,” Harry said annoyed. “I know what I’m looking for.”

“I’m sure you do,” the goblin said skeptically.

"Stay here," ordered Harry.

The goblin nodded. Harry walked into the vault not sure where the sword could be. He felt his heart speed up as it had the first time he came into proximity with the locket. There was something else here. Something was drawing him to it. He looked around, on a shelf high above his head there it was, Helga Hufflepuff’s cup. One of the Horcruxes was here.

“There are two things I need to take,” Harry told the goblin.

“Do what you will,” warned the goblin.

Harry looked around, he needed to find the sword first. He walked a few feet further back and there it was sitting proudly atop an old jewel encrusted case. He took a deep breath as he grabbed the glistening hilt of the Gryffindor's sword. Nothing happened to him but Harry could hear something outside. An alarm had been sounded. The other goblins now knew he wasn’t the real Rodolphus Lestrange. Harry stuck the sword through his belt along with Lestrange’s wand. He used his own holly wand to cast a Summoning Charm but the cup did not come. He should have expected that. He would have to climb to reach the golden chalice.

“Move quickly,” warned Gorgar.

Harry’s toe bumped into a goblet sitting by his foot. The metal burned with a fiery heat and created a second, identical copy of itself.

Harry frowned. “Why didn’t the sword do that?”

“The sword is not guarded by the wards of the bank,” Gorgar answered. “The Sword of Gryffindor has a magic of its own. It can present itself to its house it deems worthy. When it is no longer needed it will return to its proper home.”

“Right,” Harry grumbled. He placed a hand above him on the shelf holding a large ornate box. It burned his flesh and another identical box appeared beside it. The same happened when his toes
touched a large bowl to his left. He did his best not touch any further objects as he climbed but it was nearly impossible. Every step higher he bumped into something else. He grabbed hold of the goblet the pain of contact excruciating. Still, he held firm as the cup created copy after copy of itself. There would be no way for him to find it again if he let go.

The room felt like an oven as the room continued to fill with the scalding copies of the innumerable treasures. Harry could hear voices approaching the door that had closed at some point. He had lost track of Gorgar. He shoved the cup into Hagrid's poach so he could free his hands. He forced his way closer toward the door, his wand in hand once more. He fell forward in a wave of gold and silver as the goblins opened the door.

“It’s Potter,” one of the goblins said standing over the teen. Harry gripped firmly to the handle of his wand.

“On your feet,” a goblin ordered Harry.

“This way,” one of the goblin said as the teen stumbled after him.

They could hear voices coming in their direction. They were getting closer. They were forced to retreat. Goblins and wizards came running into the opening where the Lestrange vault was all shooting spells.

Harry started to throw indiscriminate Stunning Spells around him. The goblins surrounding him fell in place. Those still standing drew closer, daggers in hand. He was surrounded by enemies on all sides. A roar from the equally trapped beast behind him gave Harry an idea.

"Relashio!" Harry cried severing the chains around one leg then the other. He repeated the spell to cut the last remaining chain. The dragon did not move. It did not realize it was free. Harry took the moment to climb onto the back of the giant. He had just gotten hold as the beast began to move. It was climbing the walls, forcing its way higher. The great spiked tail thrashed knocking over goblins at first, sending rocks showering down as they went higher. The creature was too big for the space it was trying to move into, Harry muttered gouging spells forcing bit of rock out of their way. The dragon continued to climb. It could smell the fresher air the closer to the surface they got.

The goblins at the entrance to the tunnels screamed and moved out of their way, too scared to try and stop the enraged dragon. The goblins at the door were braver trying to force the doors closed the capture the beast once more. The heavy metal doors were no match for the force of the dragon's body. They burst off their hinges as it flew through free first time. Harry hung on until he could feel the animal began to climb.

Harry looked down to see the ground below. The could see the bustling road below him growing smaller. They were heading north, how long the dragon would continue this way he did not know. The dragon arrived at altitude it liked in the cold wet air of low clouds. Harry climbed to the center of its back now that they were going no higher. He stood in the center of the dragon's back and silently repeating the three D’s of Apparition, turned on his heel.

Harry landed awkwardly on the top step of the entrance to Grimmauld Place. If Death Eaters were still watching the house he was sure they must have seen his elbow. He hoped they had not seen the silver blade of the sword that remained stuck through the belt of Harry's jeans.

Harry opened the door and walked into the front hall. He used the time of Dumbledore's shade
questioning him to recollect his wits. Hermione and the twins were waiting for him at the entrance to the drawing room.

"You look awful," Hermione said gently touching a blister on the side of Harry's face.

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

"Did you get it," George asked needlessly, the sword clearly visible at Harry's waist.

Harry nodded as he removed the sword and threw it onto the table, finally overturning the long abandoned game of chess between Harry and Sirius. The teen smiled a little at himself as the annoyed chessmen yelled and cursed at him for the action.

"This is great," Fred said picking up the sword.

Harry sank exhausted into Sirius' chair. "That's not all I got." Harry croaked. He needed something to drink. His throat hurt as he spoke.

"It's not," George asked.

Harry shook his head. Hermione came to stand beside him dabbing the essence of dittany on the burns. He flinched away from her ministrations.

"Sorry," Hermione apologized, not stopping.

Harry pushed her hand away.

"Harry," Hermione chided.

The boy ignored her as he sat up. He removed the cup from the bag around his neck.

"What's that?" "Is that?" Fred and George said together.

"Hufflepuff's cup," Harry confirmed with a tired nod.

"Two down," George said with a grin.

"Not until we destroy them," Harry mumbled before falling asleep where he sat.

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Harry didn't know how long he had been asleep when he woke, still in Sirius' chair. He could hear cursing from down the hall. He stood and stretched, his back cramping from sleeping in such an awkward position. He followed the sound of the voices. Fred stood with the sword in his hand. The necklace and goblet lay side-by-side on the low table.

"Try it again," urged George.
Harry watched as Fred swung the sword above his head bringing it down with as much force as he could muster. The silver blade ricocheted off the golden cup. The blade damaged the cup unharmed. Fred made to repeat the action.

"Stop," Harry ordered from his place just inside the door frame. The twins turned to look at him. The sword still raised above Fred's head.

"How many times have you done that?" Harry demanded as he approached the table.

Fred looked to his brother.

"Three or four," George said uneasily.

"Something isn't right," Harry said motioning for the sword.

Fred dropped his arm and brought it out in front of him. He offered Harry the sword hilt first. The black haired boy took it in hand once again. It looked just like the sword that he had drawn from the Sorting Hat four years before. If this was the sword from the Chamber of Secrets, why was it not destroying the Horcrux?

Harry ran his hand down the blade there was a ding in the blade half an inch long and almost a quarter of an inch deep. He set the cup inspecting it to make sure his suspensions were correct. The cup was completely unaffected.

"I am thought this was supposed to destroy them," Fred asked Harry.

"It should," Harry said running a finger over the badger on the front of the cup. "I don't understand. Have you tried the locket yet?"

Fred shook his head. "Do you think it will work better?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed. "Where's Hermione?"

"She was having a lie-down," George informed him.

"So you decided to just destroy the Horcruxes right now," Harry asked.

"Should we have waited?" demanded an affronted Fred. "I thought the whole point of this mission was to get rid of these damn things."

"What's with all the yelling," Hermione asked joining the boys.

"Harry's angry we tried to get rid of the bloody Horcruxes without him. Not that it did us any good," George explained.

"What do you mean, George?" Hermione asked any sign of sleep disappearing in an instant.

Harry handed her the cup describing what he had witnessed. Hermione took the sword from him next. The girl's brow was furrowed in deep concentration. She ran a finger over the damaged blade. She tapped the sword with her wand several times. The boys watched her muttering to herself for several minutes until she set the sword down again. She repeated the process again before finally stepping back.
"What's going on Hermione," Harry dared to ask.

"It's not the right sword," Hermione announced.

"What the bloody Hell do you mean it's not the right sword," George demanded. "It's the sword Harry used to kill the basilisk isn't it?"

Hermione shook her head. "The one Harry used in the Chamber of Secrets was made by goblins. This sword was made by wizards. It's a copy. A good copy but it will do us no good in destroying the Horcruxes."

"Now what do we do," Fred asked collapsing in defeat onto the overstuffed chair behind him.

"We find the sword, the real one," Harry concluded.

"Great another thing to find," Fred lamented. "Any idea where it might be?"

Harry sighed, "Not a clue."

The room was heavy with the silence of the momentary defeat. Harry's skull felt as if it were going to burst open. Voldemort stood in the ruined entrance to the high security vaults of Gringotts. A wizard stood before him. The man was trying to explain what had happened that afternoon. Harry had stolen the sword of Gryffindor. The didn't have a chance to finish his explanation of what happened before Voldemort murdered him. Any other employee that did not flee died.

Voldemort walked into the vault, he needed to make sure that was all the boy had taken. Bellatrix was a dedicated servant. She would never dare put any of her master's belongings at risk. He walk slowly around the vault try to find. He waved his wand dropping the protective magics that should be around the cup and tried Summoning it. Nothing happened. The cup was not here. How could the boy know? Dumbledore.

He would have to check the rest of his treasures. Who else could know about them? No one knew of the Gaunts. The first to be created and hidden, possibly the least protected. He would have to redouble his efforts to protect it. The cave, only he could have reached that place. Could someone at the orphanage mentioned it to nosy Dumbledore? Of course they would have. No other had learned as much about the castle of Hogwarts as he. That one was safe. Nagini the snake would have to be kept safe. She was too important now. He could not afford to lose her.

The quest for the wand could wait while he ensured the Horcruxes were safe. It would do little good to have the Hollows if there was no way to ensure his survival.

Harry breathed through the pain. "He knows we have the sword and the cup,"

"Does he know the sword is a fake?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. He's worried about protecting the other Horcruxes. What in the Hell are the Hollows? He's after some wand," Harry informed them.

"At least we're not the only ones looking for something," Fred said with a hollow laugh.
The radio that sat on the mantel beside Remus' clock was tuned to a Muggle station for the evening. Fred had changed the station unable to listen to one another list of casualties, Death Eater victories, and the hopes that Harry knew that those people out there supported him.

*Christmas Eve will find me*
*Where the love light gleams*
*I'll be home for Christmas*
*Even if only in my dreams...*

Sang out, Bing Crosby.

"Well that's cheery," Fred grumbled as he turned off the radio.

"It was written during World War II," Hermione explained. Harry noticed she was rubbing at the corner of her eye as she said, "It was a Muggle war around the time the continent was facing Grindelwald."

Fred nodded, "Still, not the thing we need to lift the spirits."

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "I didn't realize we were that close to the holidays."

After the break in the four had been more reluctant to leave the house. The number of Death Eaters in the square on watch had at least tripled. Harry's visions of Voldemort's actions were coming less frequently. The dark wizard seemed to still be after the thing that was stolen from Gregovich many years before, by Grindelwald if Harry was right.

As far as they knew, Voldemort hadn't gone to check the condition of the remaining Horcruxes. The only change was that Nagini was in more of the visions, but not all. The wizard seemed to want to keep the snake close but was still willing to send it out for some important tasks.

Hermione pulled out a calendar she had tucked into her ever present beaded-bag. She ran a finger down the month of December. "If they stay true to the holiday schedule of the past the students should be heading home in the next few days."

Harry looked down sadly at his lap, "It's too bad it doesn't matter. Even if we wanted to visit someone, we can't."

"What do you mean mate," George demanded.

"We can't go and see them," Harry said heavily.

"Why can't we," asked Fred.

"We can't put them in any more danger," Harry said as he ran a hand through his already messy hair.

"Mate, if we're going to talk to anyone that's still at Hogwarts, this is going to be our only chance. There's no way we're going to be able to get into the castle." Fred pointed out.
Harry shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"Don't you want to know what's happening to your girlfriend," George asked.

"Of course I do," Harry sighed. "But me trying to drop in on her is only going to put her at greater risk. You've seen what her dad's been writing. How long do you think they'll let him get away with that sort of thing? Contact with Undesirable Number One, the Ministry will be shipping them both off to Azkaban in the hour."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that Harry," Hermione said softly.

All three boys turned to look at the bushy-haired girl who sat curled around her copy of Hogwarts a History.

"What's that Hermione," George asked.

"They've taken Luna," Hermione said looking at the coin that lay in her palm.

"When," Harry demanded.

Hermione frowned. "Just now, I suppose. They boarded the Hogwarts Express and got her."

"How," Fred began but was unsure how to continue.

"Neville saw it?" Harry asked.

"I think so," Hermione said nodding. "Where are they going to take her?"

Harry sighed, "How am I supposed to know?"

"Maybe one of the Order members might have an idea," Hermione suggested.

"And how are we supposed to get hold of one of them," George asked.

The girl ignored the annoyed tone of the redhead. "Do you still have that mirror Sirius gave you a few Christmases back, Harry?"

"No," Harry sighed. "I gave it to Luna."

"Luna has the mirror," Hermione repeated. "She just needs to call Remus and he can come to her aide."

"He's supposed to breakout her of Azkaban by himself," Fred said in disbelief.

"They won't take her to Azkaban, at least not at first," Harry said with a frown.

"Why wouldn't they," George asked as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"You remember what that one bloke at Ministry said, 'they're taking anyone they think has knowledge of Harry Potter or the other undesirables to Malfoy Manor.'" Harry said pacing in front of the fire. "Now, we just need to figure out a way to get into Malfoy Manor."
Harry paced in front of the fireplace muttering to himself.

"Harry," Hermione said softly. "What are you trying to do?"

"Figure out how the bloody Hell to get into Malfoy Manor," Harry snapped. "How the Hell do we get into the Malfoy's warded mansion? We have no idea where they could have put her."

"We don't," Hermione agreed, "but we know someone who probably has a good idea. He knows the Malfoys better than anyone one here."

Harry stopped pacing. "Dobby," he called out clearly.

The elf appeared with a crack before Harry.

"Harry Potter sir is callings Dobby sir," the elf asked bowing low in front of Harry.

"We think somebody we know is being held in Malfoy Manor. Do you know where they might do that?" Harry asked.

"Yes Harry Potter sir, Dobby is knowing," Dobby said uncomfortably. "The basement is holdings peoples. It's not a good place Harry Potter sir."

"I know Dobby," Harry said. "They're holding one of my friends there."

"Dobby is helping Harry Potter sir," the elf promised. "How is Dobby helping Harry Potter?"

"Can you help us get in there so we can rescue our friend?" Harry asked.

The little elf shook his head. "No Harry Potter," the elf said. "Harry Potter must not go there. Dobby is rescuing Harry Potter's friend for him."

"Dobby, we can't ask you to do that," Hermione said horrified by the idea of making such a request of the elf.

"Dobby is doing for Harry Potter," the little house elf insisted.

"Dobby," Harry said softly, "that's really great of you to volunteer but I don't want you to get hurt."

"Harry Potter and his friends can't go into Malfoy Manor. They will get hurt. Dobby can go and no one will know," Dobby argued.

"Why won't they know," Harry asked.

"House elf magic is different than that of wizards. We's can go wheres wizards can't," Dobby explained.

"Of course," Hermione said stepping closer to the pair. "Think about it, Harry. They can Apparate in and out of Hogwarts when we can't."

Harry bit his lip uncertainly. No matter how mad the little elf might drive him he didn't want the little creature to be hurt for him or any of his friends.
"Let Dobby help Harry Potter," the elf begged.

Harry sighed, "Okay."

"Where he's going to bring her," Fred asked throwing another wrench in the works.

"He can bring her here," Harry said.

"Is that a good idea? We're bringing another person under the Fidelius Charm. We don't know how strong the wards are as is," George pointed out.

"She's already been here," Hermione informed the twins.

"When," the boys demanded together.

"Just after the wedding. She was with us when Kingsley's Petronas arrived. Hermione grabbed the both of us here like we planned."

"Alright," Fred agreed.

Harry nodded. "You can go and get her whenever you're ready," he said to the elf. "Make sure you don't get caught." Harry eye's locked onto the tennis ball green ones of the elf. "I know you're a free elf so don't have to take orders but I don't want you or Luna to get hurt."

"Dobby won't let Harry Potter down," elf told him earnestly.

"I know you won't," Harry said with a small smile.

Dobby disappeared with a crack. Nobody knew how long it would take for the elf to return. It had taken Kreacher over a week to find Mundungus. Dobby knew where Luna was most likely to be what he needed was to make sure he wasn't seen taking Luna. There was no way for anyone in the house to know how many people were watching Luna, or that she was being held where they thought.

~*~*****~*~*****~*


The crack of the elf appearing again left then twenty minutes later shocked the four of them sitting in the living room. Luna stood next to Dobby the butterbeer cork earrings back in place. She wore a torn brightly colored sweater and a clashing set of overalls. She was also missing her right shoe. Harry noticed. Luna wasn't the only person Dobby had brought back with him. A crumpled old man lay curled on his side. His wrinkled face was pinched in pain.

"Hullo Harry Potter," Luna greeted her boyfriend as if she had not just been rescued from the depth of a Death Eaters' basement and exposed to Merlin knew what sort of treatment. The three others had their wands pointed at the new arrivals.

"We need to make sure they are who they say they are," Hermione reminded them.

Harry nodded, trying to think of a good question to ask to ensure it was indeed his girlfriend. He
racked his brains and said, "Why did we first met?"

Harry missed the look of confusion that passed across the faces of his friends. He had never in great detail discussed how he met Luna back at the beginning of his third year. They knew he met her and he like everyone else, considered her a bit strange. That was to be expected.

"You thought you were mad because you could see thestrals. You were afraid one was going to attack me at the edge of the Forbidden Forest," Luna said airily looking around the room.

"And who's that," George as of the old man still lying curled on the floor.

"It's Mr. Ollivander," Luna answered for them. "They've been holding him quite a long time."

The twins knelt down to help the old man into the chair. The man's silver eyes surveyed the room.

"Harry Potter," he greeted. "Holly and phoenix feather, eleven and a half inches long, Hermione Granger willow and unicorn hair, twelve inches long."

"It's him," agreed Hermione. She began to move her wand over the man casting various spells she had learned from Harry's first aid book.

"How long have they held you Mr. Ollivander," Harry asked worryingly.

"A long-time...months...years..." Ollivander said as Hermione continued to mutter spells around him.

"Why did they want you," Harry asked gently.

"The wands," Ollivander croaked. "The twin cores he wanted to find away around the twin cores. He wanted to ensure the next time he faces you the magic of the wands themselves will not be able to protect you."

"Bugger," George breathed.

"He seeks a new wand, one greater than all others ever created," Ollivander continued.

"Double bugger," agreed Fred.

"A wand is only as good as the wizard wielding it," Hermione insisted.

"Wands are not a simple matter of a bit of wood and a magical core," Ollivander protested even in his weakened state his voice was strong. "If it were simply as that choosing a wand would be as simple as buying a new pair of socks. The wand chooses the wizard," the ancient wizard insisted.

"And You-Know-Who is looking for the greatest wand ever created," Harry grumbled. "Is there one wand supposed to be better than all the others? Is it made of something unique? Does it have special powers?"

Hermione passed the aged wizard several vials of potions to drink delaying his answer.

"There have been tales throughout history of such wands, the Death Stick, the Wand of Destiny," Ollivander replied between sips of water Hermione gave him to wash the taste of the potions from his mouth. "These wands and their owners have long and bloodied histories. There is no way to
know if this is one wand or many. If it was the particularly talented and destructive wizard."

"It's one wand," Luna said from her place on the sofa next to Fred who was cleaning the cut on Luna's forehead, "the Elder Wand. The wand of the Deathly Hallows."

"The what," Hermione asked.

"It is the talk of children's stories, the wand of the three brothers," Ollivander said dismissively. "Pay her no mind."

"What do you mean it's from a children's story, Mr. Ollivander," Harry asked the old man. He was intrigued by this new lead.

"You know the story of The Three Brothers," Mr. Ollivander said before taking a sip of water.

"Yes," everyone said as Harry replied, "No".

"It starts with the story," Mr. Ollivander said.

"Hermione, you still have that copy of Beedle the Bard," George asked.

"It's in my bag," she confirmed.

"It's in ruins remember," Fred said as he Summoned the book from the depth of the bag.

"We have someone who can read it," George said taking the book from his brother.

"I'm busy George," Hermione scolded still working on Mr. Ollivander.

"I can read them," Luna said popping up to take the book. She flipped it to the appropriate page. She read them the story of the three brothers who cheated death and were each rewarded with a prize, the oldest an unbeatable wand made of Elder Wood, the middle brother a stone to recall the dead to the world of the living, and the youngest a cloak of invisibility. The gifts of the oldest two brothers betrayed them and lead to their early deaths, it was the last the cloak that let the youngest lived to a ripe old age and greet death as a friend.

"Some believe that the wand in the story is real. That all of these items exist in our world," Ollivander said. "It is utter fantasy."

"The Hallows are real," Luna insisted as she closed the book. Ollivander made a sound of contempt.

"I'm sorry," Harry said looking at the old man to Luna. "What are the Hallows?"

"The Deathly Hallows," Luna corrected. She opened the text to the first page of the story. She pointed to the triangular eye on the top of the page that had puzzled Hermione for months.

"The Elder Wand," she said running her finger down the centerline of the drawing. "The Resurrection Stone," said moving her finger over the circle of the eye. "And the Cloak of Invisibility," she outlined the triangle that formed the outer edge of the drawing. "These are the Deathly Hollows, created by brothers Peverell. They are the quest of many. It is said, the one to possess all three shall be the master of death."
"Complete nonsense," Ollivander grumbled. "No one can defeat Death."

"The master of death," Harry repeated as a cold shiver ran down his spine. "He wants these things so he might defeat death."

"They're not real, boy," Ollivander scolded. "A wand may change allegiances if taken from its master, such as in combat. No wand would be able to deny this magic. Such a powerful wand would be well known through the world."

"It is, the Death Stick, the Wand of Destiny," Luna reminded them. "The trail is lost after the death of Loxais. Who can say if it was Arcus or Livius that defeated him."

"A cloak of invisibility that is able to hide one so well even Death cannot find you," Ollivander continued skeptically. "This cloak would not be a traveling cloak imbied with a Disillusionment Charm or woven from the hair of a Demiguise. A cloak that is infallible, no holes, never fades. Do you know of such a cloak?"

No of the younger people responded. They all knew that Harry's fit such a description perfectly.

"What about the stone?" Hermione asked. She looked away from her patient as she turned to her friend. "How can there possibly be a stone that lets you recall the dead?"

"How can we know all of the things that are possible," Luna asked in response.

"The lack of proof of something doesn't exist doesn't mean it does," Hermione sighed.

"Why not," Luna said looking back to Hermione. "If the Hallows did not exist, then why would they have the mark on Peverells tombstone in Godric's Hollow?"

The brunette shook her bushy head, not sure what to say in response.

"Rubbish," mumbled Ollivander.

Hermione nodded, focusing on the wizard's care once more. She cast several more spells over the old wizard. The silver eyes had closed into an uneasy sleep. She stepped away from the old man, motioning for the others to follow her out of the room to talk. Harry was the last out of the room closing it so only a crack remained open.

"What's wrong, Hermione," Harry asked speaking as if they were still in the room with their sleeping patient.

"There's nothing more I can do for him, Harry. He needs to go to St. Mungo's," Hermione answered speaking just as softly.

"We can't take him there," Harry said his eyes lifting in horror at the very idea. "The Death Eaters would kill us and him as soon as we stepped out of the fireplace."

"I know," Hermione agreed. "He's beyond my capability to treat. If he doesn't get better care, he'll die."

Harry took a deep breath. He didn't want to be responsible for the death of the greatest wand maker,
possibly in all the world.

"Where can we take him?"

Hermione's voice shook, her nerves frayed. "I don't know," she admitted.

Fred smacked his brother's chest, "We should take him to Mum. She's brilliant with healing spells. She had to be with the seven of us always getting into things."

"Do you think she can take care of someone as injured as him?" Harry asked the twins.

The redheads looked at one another as if having a silent conversation.

"She was able to stabilize Kingsley after the breakout attempt a few years ago," George finally said to the remaining pair in the hall.

"I think she's the best choice we have left," Hermione told Harry.

"Alright," Harry agreed. "So we need to Apparate him to the Burrow?"

"I don't think Mum will be there," Fred said looking at his twin.

"Then where is she going to be," Harry asked.

"She'll be in hiding," George confirmed. "If we're lucky she will have gone to stay with Bill and Fleur but she might be with Auntie Muriel." The twins shuttered simultaneously at the mention of their elderly aunt.

"For the sake of everyone's sanity I hope she went to Bill and Fleur's," Fred added.

"Can you get there," Hermione asked.

George nodded, "Bill let us in on the Fidelius Charm before we went into hiding." Asking Fred he said, "One of us goes makes sure they're there and we take him there together?"

"Sounds good to me," Fred agreed.

"No," Harry objected.

Fred cocked his head to the side. "What's the matter, Harry?"

"Somebody has to take Luna," Harry clarified.

"You two as well," Fred remained him. "It'll take us a couple of trips."

"I'm not coming," Harry objected.

"Mum will kill us if we show up without you," George complained.

"I can't go," Harry insisted. "There's something else I need to do."

"What," demanded the twins together.
"What could be so important that it can’t wait until after the holidays?" Demanded Fred, his arms crossed over his chest. "We weren't joking when we said Mum would kill us. She's mad enough at us for coming with you on this trip. If she thinks we've abandoned you too."

"I can't," Harry repeated.

"There where do you plan to go?" George requested.

"I need to go to Godric's Hollow," Harry answered. "I think it's time. We've been talking about it for ages."

"Harry, mate, I know you want to see your parents' graves or whatever but why can't it wait until after Christmas," George asked.

Harry shifted from one foot to the other trying to put his jumble of feelings into words. "The holidays aren't important to me. I think going to Godric's Hollow will get me one step closer to defeating You-Know-Who."

"Are you sure," Hermione asked softly.

"No," Harry admitted, "I'm not sure of anything anymore. Bagshot gave me that book for a reason. I need to ask her why. I have so many questions for her about Dumbledore and Grindelwald."

"I'm coming with you," Hermione stated firmly.

"Hermione," Harry protested. "I can't ask you to do that."

"Good thing neither of us was asking." She pushed a lock of bushy hair away from her face. "I won't let you go alone. We have to assume he has someone watching the village. You need to stay safe if we have any hope of defeating You-Know-Who."

Harry sighed, "Fine. You can come, Hermione."

"What about Luna," George asked looking at the younger girl. Her normally wide, dreamy eyes had large grey bags under them. Her hair was dirty.

"Harry Potter, I am coming with you," the blonde began.

"No," Harry said holding up his hand to stop her speaking further. "I've said this once already. I can't have you with us on this mission. You're too young. You still have the Trace on you. And," Harry took a deep breath before speaking again, "I'd worry about you too much."

Fred snickered, "Always the romantic, Potter. So where is she going? I doubt it would be safe to take her home. According to Potterwatch, he's rattling the bars of the Ministry pretty hard. If his recently kidnapped daughter magically returns home it won't be good for anyone."

"She'll come home with us, of course," George answered before anyone else had a chance to make a suggestion.

There were no protests to the suggestion. After Fred Apparated away to locate his family members, Hermione woke Ollivander for another round of potions. He would need to be medicated during travel. Harry anxiously by waiting for news. Even Luna calm, steady presence did little to relieve his
frayed nerves. Fred was gone less than an hour before he returned having located family members in both locations. Mrs. Weasley had resisted going into hiding until Luna was captured. She was staying with Auntie Muriel along with Percy. Ron and Ginny had opted to stay with Bill and Fleur.

"Anyway we can get Mum to Bill and Fleur's instead," George asked half-jokingly.

Fred shook his head, "I already asked."

"Stop fooling about," Hermione chided. "He needs care as soon as we can get it to him."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you were heading to Muriel's," George mumbled under his breath.

Hermione had given the twins a bag containing all of their necessities to be away four to five days. They planned to meet back at the Number Twelve on New Year's day if all went according to plan, with the information about Grindelwald and why Voldemort would want to find him in hand. Fred Apparated away with the frail form of Mr. Ollivander beside him. George took Luna a few minutes later. Harry fought back the feeling he wouldn't see her again.

"Harry, are you okay," Hermione asked.

He waved a hand away at her, "I'm fine. Let's go."

Kreacher wasn't happy to hear that everyone was leaving. He was comforted slightly when Hermione said they were only supposed to be away for a week or so. Still, Harry gave him the order if they were not back at that point he was to return to Hogwarts to work in the kitchens with the strict order to not discuss anything he heard the residents talking about.

"We'll see you in a few days Kreacher," Harry said as he took Hermione's hand as they Apparated away from Grimmauld Place.

The night's air was bracing. Harry breathed deeply as he adjusted being back on his feet in this new location. It was nice to be out in fresh air once more. Harry hadn't realized how much he missed in his time locked up in the London house. Hermione squeezed his hand once before letting it drop back to her side.

The streets of Godric's Hollow were nearly abandoned from what they could see from where they stood. The large windows of the shops were decorated for the Christmas season. Old fashioned wreaths hung on the doors. Like in so many small villages, in the center of the village stood an old war marker. Harry jerked his head in the direction of the marker. The two began to walk slowly through the snow. As they approached the marker, it was no longer the monolith for the war dead, but a stone statue of a woman, sitting beside a man and their infant son.

"It's my parents," Harry gasped. He stared up into their stone faces. James with his untidy hair and round glasses, just like Harry. Lily beside him, her pretty, kind face. Both were looking at their stone son, the happy baby Harry. The baby's forehead free of the scar, before the touch of Lord Voldemort.
"Oh Harry," Hermione breathed.

The street was momentarily filled with light as a door opened behind them. The sounds of a carol-filled their ears.

"I think it might be Christmas Eve," Hermione whispered to Harry.

"You might be right," he agreed. "My parents will be in there." He pointed to the cemetery beside the tiny church. "Don't you think?"

Hermione nodded as they made their way carefully across the slippery trodden on snow. Harry pushed open the small kissing gate. He had no idea where his parents might lay. His eyes jumped from stone in search of his parents' names. Abbott, maybe a distant relative of Hannah's, he thought to himself. Hermione was a little way behind him doing the same.

"Harry, come look," Hermione stood by a very old and worn gravestone. At the top was the mark, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows, if Luna was to be believed. Harry leaned down to study the mark.

"She was telling the truth," Harry whispered to Hermione.

"I didn't think she was lying. That doesn't mean this wizard had an unbeatable wand, Harry." Hermione cautioned.

Harry said nothing, resuming his search for his parents' graves. He stopped at another grave, as eyes fell on the name Dumbledore. Kendra was at the top, followed by her birth and death dates. Just below that was, "and her daughter Ariana." Below the names was an inscription, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart be also."

"What's that supposed to mean," Harry muttered to himself.

This was the first proof he had seen that not everything Rita Skeeter had written in her biography was a total lie. Dumbledore had had a younger sister, one he had never mentioned. The Dumbledores must have lived and died here at some point, just as the book said. Why had the headmaster never told Harry they shared the connection to this small village?

"Harry," Hermione called his attention once more. "They're here."

Harry weaved his way through the two rows of tombstones between him and Hermione. There they were, James and Lily Potter with their birthday and the date of their death. Under was the carved inscription

Harry read it out loud, "'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'. Isn't that what the Death Eaters think?"

"It's not like that," Hermione reassured. "It's about living on. Living after death." She waved her wand making a wreath of Christmas roses.

Harry placed it with great care on the stone. He cried as he ran a gloved hand over the names of his parents. Living beyond death? They were gone, the only thing left now were bones, maybe only dust. Hermione let him cry as the snow began to fall once more. The tears formed frozen rivers.
down Harry's cheeks as they fell. When at his tears were spent he stood, rubbing the frigid trails away with the back of his hand.

"We should try and find Bagshot," Hermione urged.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, his voice still tight from his crying.

"How are we going to find her," Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. They walked side-by-side back out of the cemetery. "Let's go this way," Harry said motioning to the direction opposite the way they had come. Hermione followed his lead. She looked around them.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked her.

"It feels like someone is watching us," she said as she looked around the street once again. " Didn't you feel it back at the cemetery?"

Harry shook his head.

"I think somebody is following us," Hermione whispered nervously. "Maybe we should put the Invisibility Cloak on."

"You think we need to," Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione urged.

"Don't you think if Death Eaters were here we would be dead already," Harry asked.

"Harry, why are you being so foolish," Hermione demanded as she pulled the cloak out of her bag. "You are the one You-Know-Who wants. He probably has somebody watching the village because he knows you'll come at some point."

Harry conceded to her argument and did not resist as she threw the shimmering silver fabric over them. Their pace slowed as they shuffled along to make sure their feet didn't show. They walked past small cottages with snow-covered gardens and smoking chimneys.

"Do we have any idea which might be Bagshot's?" Hermione asked.

Harry didn't answer her question, he was too distracted by the house that had just come into view. The lawn was overgrown, what was left of the house covered in an overwhelming growth of ivy. The top right corner of the house was missing.

"This was our house," Harry said mostly to himself. He took hold of the metal fence in front of him, desperate to have contact with some piece of this part of his life. A large sign appeared in front of them saying the house was preserved in the state it was on the night James and Lily died as a memorial to the violence that ripped the Potter family apart. The sign was covered in graffiti. Some had signed their names, others wrote their support for Harry.

"That must have been my nursery," Harry pointed to the missing corner of the house. "It's a wonder Hagrid was able to get me out of there."
There was a sound of slow footsteps coming down the street. The teens turned in the direction of the sound. It was the hunched form of an elderly woman.

"Ms. Bagshot," Harry said removing the cloak, he identified as she passed under a street lamp.

"Harry," Hermione scolded.

"Ms. Bagshot," Harry repeated.

The old woman stopped and looked at Harry as if trying to place him.

"Ms. Bagshot," Harry approached the woman cautiously, "I wonder if I could ask you about a few things."

The old woman nodded. She lumbered down the snow slick street.

Harry made to follow her. Hermione grabbed him by the wrist.

"What are you thinking," Hermione hissed.

"We came here to find her," Harry said watching as the woman continued to walk away.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Hermione advised.

"Don't you want to know about what Dumbledore was doing with Grindelwald?" Harry asked. "What about the Peverell brothers? She is supposed to be the greatest magical historian of our time. If anyone knows if they were the three brothers of the story and created the Hallows, she would."

Hermione paused, considering Harry's argument.

Seeing her uncertainty in desperation, Harry added, "Who else would have Dumbledore left the sword with?"

Hermione let go of his wrist. The old woman had stopped under the next street lamp. She must have sensed that they weren't following her. Harry walked as quickly as he could without slipping on the ice to catch up with Ms. Bagshot. Hermione followed behind more slowly.

"Ms. Bagshot at the wedding you gave me that book, you said James was always Dumbledore's favorite son. What did you mean?" Harry asked as he walked by the old woman. She was unsteady on the slippery street. She didn't answer his question.

The two walked side-by-side up the little street, Harry asking questions and receiving no responses. The woman turned down the garden path of one of the last houses on the street. The garden here was not the perfectly manicured ones of the others on the street. It more closely resembled that of the Potter's home, what wasn't buried under the snow was wild and overgrown.

The old woman fumbled with an old-fashioned key, versus opening the door with her wand. Harry took the bit of metal and turned it in the lock for her. The house was dark and smelled bad, like something rotten and forgotten about. There were discarded dishes and old food sitting on plates everywhere. Books were piled in precarious stacks on many of the surfaces.

The old woman was fumbling with matches to light the candles around the room now. Harry took them and struck the first with ease. Hermione was studying the pictures on the mantel. A number of
empty frames sat next to the others.

"Did Dumbledore leave something with you? A sword maybe? It's really important, Ms. Bagshot. We need your help."

The woman motioned for Harry to follow her. They stepped into the next room. Something silver caught the light under the woman's long sleeve. Harry frowned. It was a hand, a silver hand. "You're not Bagshot," Harry realized too late. Pettigrew had placed his fingers on his arm, grasping his Dark Mark, summoning the Dark Lord.

Harry drew his wand, "How could you? I saved your life once. I stopped Sirius and Remus from killing you in the Shrieking Shack. Summoning your master, you know he means to kill me."

"We're all already dead, don't you know that Harry Potter?" Pettigrew pulling his own wand. The rat-faced wizard cast a Stunning Spell at Harry.

Harry blocked the spell, causing it to ricochet and blast a stack of books apart. Harry shot his own Stunning Spell at Pettigrew. He ducked and it missed by inches, blowing a large hole in the wall. "What Earth is going on here," Hermione demanded running into the room.

One of Pettigrew's spells grazed her face, cutting it. Hermione shot a spell at the little wizard, but he was too fast. Harry tried to hit him while he was distracted. The Death Eater screamed in pain.

No, it was Harry who was screaming. His head felt like it was on fire. He could feel Voldemort's emotions, his exuberance. He would finally be rid of Harry Potter. Harry felt his wand fall from his hand. Hermione was still fighting Pettigrew. She ducked and saw Harry collapsed on the floor.

"He's coming," Harry warned.

Hermione grabbed his arm. She stood to turn.

"No," Pettigrew screamed.

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Harry was Voldemort. He was walking through the village of Godric's Hollow some sixteen years previous. It was Halloween the streets were filled with children dressed in costumes. He ignored them. He was so close he could taste it. The death of the boy would be the last obstacle in his quest.

Inside the house, he could see James Potter playing with the infant on the living room floor. They had no idea he was coming, assuming they were safe inside their home, having no idea they had been betrayed by one they called their own. The man's wand lay at least six feet away from him, the fool.

The door easily burst open. "Take Harry and go," James yelled to his wife. "I'll hold him off."

Hold him off with no wand? Who was he joking?

The woman grabbed the child, running upstairs. The room was filled with a green light as James fell dead, a few feet from where he had played with his child moments before. He climbed the stairs of
the small house. The child's cries could be heard from down the hall. How he hated the sound of crying. He never liked to hear the little ones at the orphanage crying.

The woman had tried to build a barricade, blocking him from the room. A flick of his wand and it was gone. "Stand aside," he ordered. "Stand aside silly girl."

"Please not Harry," the woman begged. "Please, not Harry. Take me instead. Not Harry."

If she would not move she would die. He raised his wand and she fell dead. The boy cried harder. There was only one left. He raised his wand once more. There was a flash of green and he was no more. He was spirit held here by the connections he had created. He fled, fled to the forests of Albania. He would wait there until a young man happened upon him and agreed to share his body.

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Harry woke with a groan. He felt sick to his stomach. He looked up to see the sagging roof of the tent they had borrowed for the Quidditch World Cup. He rolled over, reaching a hand out trying to find his glasses.

"Hermione," Harry called softly.

"You're awake," Hermione announced. A mixture of relief and crossing her features.

Harry sat up. "What happened?"

Hermione handed him a cup of water as she cast what Harry recognized to be a basic diagnostic charm. Harry sipped the water gratefully.

"You’ve been…:" she cast around looking for the right word, Hermione finally settled on, “ill.” Harry noticed she hadn’t answered his question. It wasn’t like her not to answer a question directly.

“Hermione, please tell me how we got here…wherever here is,” Harry pleaded.

Hermione nodded, “Alright, I don’t know how much you remember.”

“We were in Godric’s Hollow, we went to talk to Bathilda Bagshot but she wasn’t who we,” seeing her expression he corrected, “I thought she was.”

“Bagshot turned out to be Pettigrew,” Hermione confirmed. “He must have used Polyjuice to disguise himself.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Harry agreed. “I saw the silver hand and then he was grabbing his Dark Mark and bringing You-Know-Who. How did we get away?”

“I grabbed hold of you and was going to Apparate us back to Number Twelve but I felt Pettigrew grab hold of my ankle. We couldn’t stay there. It wouldn’t be safe.” Hermione explained. “I immediately Apparated again. I brought us here.”

“What about Pettigrew? The twins were supposed to be meeting us back there in a few days,” Harry
asked anxiously.

“Pettigrew isn’t an issue,” Hermione reassured.

“Not an issue,” Harry repeated, his voice thick with disbelief. “If he’s gotten into the house, I think that’s a problem.”

“He was there for a moment but he won’t be back,” Hermione insisted.

“Why’s that,” Harry asked sarcastically.

“He’s dead,” Hermione informed him. “He splinched himself beyond repair.”

Harry grimaced. He wasn’t upset to hear that the man that betrayed his parents was dead. To die in such a way was terrifying. If he failed to focus properly when Apparating, the same thing could happen to him. It was such a pitiful way to die. It was fitting for the likes of Pettigrew.

Hermione was pulling things out of her bag once again.

“How long have I been asleep,” Harry asked taking another sip of his water.

“Three days,” Hermione said removing the potion kit Remus had given Harry for his birthday. She pulled out several vials out and handed them to Harry. He slugged them back with a grimace.

“The twins won’t know we’re not at Number Twelve until at least tomorrow,” Harry muttered to himself.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed.

“How are we supposed to let them know where we are?” Harry asked laying back down on his cot.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said her voice was thick with emotion.

“This wasn’t at all how this was supposed to go.” She wiped angrily at the tears that were now streaming down her face. “I don’t think we should try using the coins. We don’t know if the Death Eaters found one on Luna when they took her off the train.”

“What about a Patronus,” Harry suggested.

“No,” Hermione said shaking her head back and forth. “Yours is too well know by far.”

“Your’s isn’t,” Harry argued.

“But it can still be followed,” Hermione countered. “I don’t know what to do now.”

Harry sighed. There were alone Merlin knew where in a sad tent that smelled of cabbage and cat pee. A cold shiver ran down Harry’s spine.

“The same thing we’ve been doing,” Harry said, throwing an arm over his eyes, “try and find the sword and the other Horcruxes. There’s still at least one more out there,” he gestured to the world around them with his other arm, “somewhere. And we have to find it. There just might be only the two of us doing it.”

Hermione went onto explain how she had cast a number of privacy spells around the area they were
camping. She wasn’t sure if it would hold off anyone determined to locate them but it should at least (hopefully) prevent anyone from accidentally stumbling upon them.

“We should take turns keeping watch, just in case,” Harry suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Hermione.

“You’ve been up for ages. I can take the first shift,” Harry didn’t so much as offer as insisted. “Go have a lie-down.”

Hermione gave him a weak smile and walked back into the tent.

“Hermione,” Harry called back inside.

“Yes Harry,” she replied coming to stand at the mouth of the tent.

“Where’s my wand?” Harry inquired.

Hermione wrung her hands nervously as if she was expecting this question.

“Hermione,” Harry asked again,

The girl removed a broken bit of wood from the depths of her bag. She handed it to Harry He took the broken bit of holly and phoenix feather carefully in hand.

“What happened,” Harry asked as he surveyed the damage.

“I don’t know exactly,” Hermione was speaking to her shoes. “I think it must have been during the fight with Pettigrew. It could have been stepped on. It was so confusing.”

Harry held up the wand to her, “You can fix it can’t you?”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Hermione said softly.

“You can try,” Harry insisted.

With a sigh, she drew her own wand and said, “Reparo.” The damaged wand came back together. A clear seam could be seen where it had broken.

“Lumos,” Harry said waving the mended wand. The small amount of magic was too much for Harry’s broken wand. It split in half once more.

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione said watching the defeated Harry.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry muttered. “It was an accident. Do we still have Lestrange’s wand?”

Hermione nodded and removed it from her bag. Harry took it testing the feel of it. It was nothing like his trusty holly and phoenix feather. It felt as if someone else’s hand was attached to the end of his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said once again.
Harry shook his head, “Go to bed, Hermione. I’ll keep watch.”

The grounds around the tent were wooded. A small stream trickled by, clogged with ice. He guessed they were in a forest of some sort, which one he would have to ask his traveling companion.

Harry kept his ears open for any sound of unwanted guests. There was nothing. A whisper of a breeze through the trees, a fox running across the snow. Harry practiced basic spells with the stolen wand. No matter what he tried, it felt like none of them got as good of results as good as his own wand.

Hermione woke near dawn. She came outside pulling her fluffy bathrobe tighter around her thin frame. “How is it,” she asked, pointing at the wand.

“It will have to do,” Harry answered.

“I’m…” Hermione began.

“Don’t bother apologizing, Hermione. What’s happened is in the past. I’ll just have to use this until I can get my old one fixed.”

“Harry,” Hermione cautioned.

Harry shook his head. “If this Elder Wand is supposed to be so powerful it should be about to fix mine.”

“I don’t think it works like that, Harry,” Hermione said sounding like a parent talking to a toddler that was set on getting the impossible.

“Do you think we should move from here?” Harry asked changing the subject. If he wasn’t mistaken, Hermione almost sighed in relief at this.

“I don’t think we have to just yet. We’re well sheltered here. I didn’t hear anyone come close to the wards the entire time you were ill,” she explained.

Harry shrugged, “Do you want me to make some coffee?”

“That would be wonderful,” Hermione said with a smile.

Harry stood, dusting the dirt and leaves off his bottom. He busied himself with making coffee and breakfast. Hermione’s beaded bag lay abandoned on the rickety table in the kitchen area. Harry picked it up and opened it. He had never really asked the girl what she had bothered to bring with them. He shoved his hand in pulling things out at random, a decoy detonator, a toothbrush (not Harry’s), a ruins dictionary. His hand was clasped around something square when Hermione stepped back into the tent.

“What are you doing,” Hermione demanded, surveying the mess.

Caught he pulled out his hand, still holding the last object, the box Luna gave him for his birthday. Harry shrugged, “I was just curious what you have in there.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “You could have asked.”
“Sorry,” Harry mumbled, “What do you have in there?”

“Everything I thought we could possibly need,” she replied. Wordlessly she began to put the items back into the bag until only the box remained out. “I’ll take that,” she said holding out her hand for it.

“No,” Harry said holding it tighter. “I think I’ll keep it for now.”

“It’s holding two Horcruxes, Harry. I think it would be better safely tucked away in the bag.” Hermione said motioning for it once more.

“It will be fine, Hermione,” the boy reassured her. “It won’t let anything dark out of the box.”

“I don’t think that’s what the inscription meant,” Hermione argued.

Harry sighed, “Would you be happier if I gave you one of them back?”

Hermione frowned, from her expression he could clearly tell she wouldn’t be happy until both were back buried deep inside the bag until they could be destroyed.

“It will be fine,” Harry said once again. “I just want to study them. Maybe I’ll have an idea how to destroy them.”

“We know how to destroy them, we need the sword or a basilisk fang,” Hermione growled.

“What if I said I just wanted to use it as target practice?” Harry asked.

“It won’t do anything to help,” Hermione said dryly.

“But it might make me feel better,” Harry said with a small smile. She made a noise of disapproval but said nothing. Harry knew not to push his luck and pulled out the necklace.

“I don’t like this,” Hermione stated staring at the golden locket. “You can feel it, can’t you? There’s something evil and alive in there.”

“I know,” Harry agreed. He could almost imagine he felt the flutter of a tiny heartbeat from inside. He didn’t comment that it was stronger than the force coming off the cup. He wondered if the difference had to do with the order of their creation. If the necklace was created first so it held a larger part of Voldemort’s shrinking soul. He shoved the piece of jewelry into his pocket, the last part of the chain sticking out the top, like an old-fashioned watch fob.

Harry poured Hermione a cup of coffee as she put things back in her bag and then removed the copy of Beedle the Bard.

“Where are we?” Harry asked as he took a seat across from the girl. “I know we’re in a forest, I just wasn’t sure which one.”

“The Forest of Dean,” Hermione replied instantly. “I came here with my parents on a camping trip when I was eight or nine… not that they’ll remember it.”
“Hermione,” Harry said.

She shook her head, “I’m okay. I just miss them.”

Harry nodded. He wouldn’t say he knew how she felt. His parents had died when he was young. Sirius was only in his life for a short time. The comparisons weren’t fair.

They stayed on the side of that stream for another two days. From there they moved on to a loch in the Scottish highlands for another few days, to an abandoned village in the south of England. Something kept drawing them back to that bit of stream bank. They never saw anyone near there. Both knew it wasn’t a good idea to keep coming back, but there was something about it that made them want to return.

Hermione spent much of her time hidden away in one book or another. She must have read them all at least a dozen times each. Some of them were probably closer to fifty or sixty times.

“The twins must have gone back to Grimmauld Place by now. Did you leave them any sort of clue where we would be?” Harry asked over lunch.

“I Apparated us directly here. I was more worried about Pettigrew,” she answered truthfully.

“If anyone could find us, it’s Fred and George,” Harry agreed.

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“The twins must have gone back to Grimmauld Place by now. Did you leave them any sort of clue where we would be?” Harry asked over lunch.

“I Apparated us directly here. I was more worried about Pettigrew,” she answered truthfully.

“If anyone could find us, it’s Fred and George,” Harry agreed.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Harry said later that evening.

“Are you sure? You’ve taken that shift the last few days. I don’t mind,” Hermione offered.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. He took up his customary place at the mouth of the tent. He practiced a few more spells with the borrowed wand. Hermione believed with more practice he would feel more comfortable with the captured wand, therefore have better results.

Frustrated that even a simple Enlarging Charm wasn’t working to make a spider in its web grow Harry set the wand a side. He pulled the locket out of his pocket. It was cold. It had absorbed any of his body heat, even after being in there the last several weeks.

He stared at the bit of gold studying the miniature snake on the front of it. In the silence, he could almost hear the heartbeat. He looked up at the snapping sound of a twig. In front of him was a brilliant silver doe. His heart sped up realizing who must have cast it. Was the man here? How could he know where they were?

The doe began to walk silently away into the woods. Was she leading him to the professor? Why hadn’t the man shown himself if he knew where they were?

Harry put the necklace around his neck so it would not get lost. He was sure the man would have a valid explanation for everything he did. He sped up hoping to catch up to the Patronus. If he did, maybe he could talk with Professor Snape. The teacher had been close with Dumbledore. Maybe he would have an idea where the sword was, or he could bring them a fang from the basilisk?
The silver doe stopped in a snow-covered clearing. Harry looked around to see if anyone was there. For the first time he left the tent he second-guessed his decision to not tell Hermione about seeing the doe or asking her to come with him. What if it wasn't Snape's Patronus? As he turned to go back something glittered in the moonlight.

Harry stopped to take a better look. The clearing was not a clearing, but a small lake. There was something a few feet down.

“Lumos,” Harry muttered, shining the faint light at the surface of the ice. There was a bit of silver extended out too. It was the Sword of Gryffindor!

The sword could present itself to any worthy Gryffindor at the moment. Is that why it was at the bottom of a lake? Did Professor Snape need to make sure he was worthy?

Harry pulled off his coat, multiple sweaters, and trousers. His socks were the last thing to come off as he picked up the borrowed wand and said, “Defendo.” The ice creaked like a gunshot into the night.

Harry stepped into the freezing water. Pain shot through his feet and up his chest as he walked into the water. He kept going, he had to get that sword. If that’s what Professor Snape thought he had to do to get it, he would do it.

Harry submerged himself to swim over the short distance to the sword. He could feel the heartbeat inside the necklace speed up too. It was panicking. The chain began to tighten. He couldn’t breathe. It was dragging him under. Things were starting to go black....

“What the ruddy Hell were you thinking?” Demanded a voice above Harry’s head.

Harry opened his eyes, he was seeing double.

“I don’t think he was thinking. Anyone with a knut’s worth of knowledge would know better than to go diving into a lake with a bit of You-Know-Whose soul hanging around their necks.”

Harry rubbed at his eyes. Both figures were still standing in front of him. “Fred,” he said addressing the one on the right.

“I’m George,” the twin complained, “Honestly, you can’t tell us apart after six years.”

“Sorry George,” Harry said sitting up.

“Only joking, I am Fred,” Fred said with a grin. It was then Harry noticed the boy was leaning on the sword almost as if it was a walking stick.

“You got it,” Harry exclaimed, a combination of relieved and excited.

“Of course, I did,” Fred said with a cocky puffing of his chest. “I left the hero work to him. He needs some glory. Can’t have him playing second fiddle all my life. Especially since I got all the looks.”

Harry and George both rolled their eyes. The dark haired boy touched his neck realizing for the first time the locket was no longer around it.

“Where’s…” Harry began to ask.
“I had to cut this off your neck, mate. It wouldn’t just come off,” George informed him holding up the offending item.

Harry nodded reaching out for it. George held it further away.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Mum would tell you to put some clothes or you’ll catch your death,” George pointed at the discarded pile of clothes. He cast a quick drying and warming charm for good measure over Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry’s response came through a thick layer of wool as he pulled his second sweater over his head.

“No problem,” George said looking at the bit of gold in his head.

“Do you want to tell us what you were thinking?” Fred asked as the dark-haired boy pulled on his jacket.

“I was going for the sword,” Harry frowned. “How did you find me?”

“We followed your doe, obviously,” Fred said rolling his eyes at the idiotic question.

“It wasn’t my doe. How did you end up here? Hermione didn’t tell anyone we were coming here.” Harry questioned.

Fred pulled out the silver cigarette lighter.

“So,” Harry demanded.

“It does more than suck up light,” Fred said shoving it in his pocket. “It’s sort of hard to explain.”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “Nobody wants to hear how a magical ball of light told us where to Apparate after we heard our names coming from that bloody thing.”

Harry turned to look back at Fred. “Is that what happened?”

Fred shrugged. “Something like that.” he moved the sword from his side to his shoulder. “I think we should be getting back to where you came from. I don’t want to run into whoever cast that Patronus.”

“I want to see them,” Harry argued. He looked over where he suspected the caster had stood.

“You know who it was,” George asked, mildly surprised. “Who was it?”

“You won’t like it,” Harry deflected.

“Who was it,” the twins demanded together.

“As long as you don’t say it was the bloody dungeon bat, I won’t bloody care who it was,” Fred grumbled.

“From the look on his face, I think you hit the nail on the head,” George said watching Harry’s somewhat guilty expression.
“How did the git know where you were?” Fred requested.

“No idea,” Harry admitted, “but he left us the sword. That’s all that matters isn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” agreed Fred. “How can we know this is the real one?”

“Only one way to find out,” Harry answered trying to grab the locket from George once again.

“No,” George said stepping to the side causing Harry to almost fall on his face as he staggered forward.

“You need me to open it,” Harry explained.

“Fine,” George agreed. “You stand there and open it me and Fred will show Voldy-Poo we mean business.”

“I need to be closer,” Harry argued.

Fred motioned for him to come a bit closer. Harry stepped four or five feet nearer to the other two wizards.

“That looks good to me,” Fred announced.

“You’ll want to set it down,” Harry advised.

“Of course we will,” Fred agreed. With a jerk of his head, George placed the locket on the ground atop a large stone.

“If this is anything like the last one I dealt with we need to be careful. The thing inside the diary nearly killed both me and Ginny,” Harry cautioned.

Fred and George nodded together. Harry could just make out the tiny snake on the front in the moonlight. He studied it imagining it as a real creature curled up asleep on a golden pillow.

“Open,” Harry hissed. It must have been Parseltongue as the halves split apart to reveal a glowing red-eye.

Fred stepped forward, sword raised high. He stabbed the left side of the necklace. A scream as if someone was murdered came from its depths. A force shoved back Fred knocking him into a tree ten feet away. The sword fell out of his hand.

“Fred,” George called running to his brother’s side. Harry joined him at the injured redhead’s side.

“Finish it,” Fred gasped, his breath returning to him.

George picked up the sword a look of determination Harry had never seen on the boy’s face before. Harry and Fred watched as the other twin approached. Out of the necklace emerged a giant shadow of a basilisk. George was not deterred. It flexed its jaws as if prepared to eat him. The snake exploded in a puff of green smoke knocking George off his feet. The shock wave had a huge clump of snow toppling onto Harry and Fred’s heads.
“Merlin, that’s cold,” complained Fred.

George picked up the smoldering bit of metal. “No worse than stopping Percy from singing in the shower.”

All three laughed as the two helped Fred to his feet. Harry lit the wand that used to belong to Rodolphus Lestrange leaving the twins to explore where Professor Snape had cast the doe Patronus. There was only one bit of evidence the man had ever been there, a letter tacked to the largest of the trees in the group. It was charmed to recognize Harry’s magical signature because he touched it the ink spread out like oil over water. The note was short and in the familiar spidery penmanship of the Potions Master.

Daring does not mean you have to be a mindless dolt, Potter. You are fortunate your friends were there to save you. If left to me, you might not be so lucky, prophecy be damned. Do not make it so Lily’s sacrifice was made in vain.
Be safe (as one can be in these times),
SS

The three walked slowly back to the tent so not to overtax the still sore Fred.

“Harry, where have you been?” Hermione demanded her hands on her hips.

“She looks like Mum when she does that,” observed Fred.

“Nah,” his twin disagreed, “She’s missing the spoon in her hand.”

“That can be fixed George Weasley,” Hermione snapped.

“I’d be careful how you say that, Hermione. People might take it the wrong way.” Fred said with a grin.
Hermione snorted.

“Is that the only greeting the returning heroes received,” Fred demanded with a smirk.

“Heroes,” Hermione repeated. “A bit full of yourself don’t you think?”

“Not really,” George said holding up the destroyed Horcrux.

“What do you think?”

Hermione stood there mouth moving, no words coming out.

“What you don’t like it? I thought jewelry was traditional for Valentine’s.” George teased.

“You,” Hermione finally managed, “How?”
Fred pulled the sword from his belt. “I think the word you are looking for is, hero.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “How did you find us? What do you mean Valentine? It’s a bit early for that don’t you think?”

“How about a cup of tea and we’ll tell you everything,” George suggested.

Hermione moved out of the way so the three boys could enter first. Harry went straight to the stove waiting for the water to boil. Fred and George explained everything that happened to them since they said goodbye at Number Twelve to seeing the doe, rescuing Harry and destroying the Horcrux. Hermione waited for them to finish their story before she caught them up on what happened to herself and Harry in the last few weeks.

“Bill and Fleur want you both to know we’re all welcome to come join them…” there was an odd pause like choking on a bite of an apple, “at any point. They’ll be happy to have us.” George informed them.

“You mean, you don’t want to spend the next few months living in the woods, on the run like an escaped convict,” his brother asked.

“No,” George said seriously. “Mostly because Harry talks in his sleep. I can’t stand to hear him hissing much longer.”

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled.

“It’s not your fault Harry, there’s no need to apologize,” Hermione glared at the other boy.

George shrugged.

“Who’s been reading this load of tosh,” Fred asked flopping open the copy of The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore to the marked page.

“Harry,” Hermione answered, her disapproval clear.

“You know she’s completely full of it, mate,” Fred asked.

Harry shook his head, “Not at much as I’d like her to be. Dumbledore and Grindelwald really were friends. We saw pictures of them together at Bagshot’s house.”

“That’s one thing, Harry,” Hermione said softly.

“One thing,” Harry repeated. “That would be like me inviting You-Know-Who over for tea with the Dursleys, Hermione.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think, Harry?” Hermione asked softly.

Fred’s brow was furrowed as he studied the page of the book his brother’s expression matched it at the look of puzzlement.

“What’s wrong, Freddie,” George joked.

Fred pointed at one of the pictures on the page. There was a girl of maybe four or five in a soft yellow dress. Her long blonde hair blowing in a soft breeze. She gave the mischievous smile as she
began to spin. She twirled so she skirts blossomed as if she were an upside down flower.

All four were watching the girl now, she twirled on the spot maybe a half-dozen more times more before turning to walk away from the reader. She froze in the middle distance before could disappear completely. The picture repeated the cycle as if it was a film on a loop.

“"There,” Fred said jabbing the photo, “that’s the same picture Luna got from Dumbledore.”

“It Luna still at your Auntie Muriel’s?” Harry asked.

George shook his head in the negative. “Auntie Muriel didn’t like all her comments about the ratspurts or whatever in the house,” the younger of the twins explained. “She went to stay with Bill and Fleur just after New Year’s.”

“We can go to Bill and Fleur's in the morning,” Harry decided.

“It’ll be nice to be in a real house again.”

“Harry,” Hermione warned.

“That’s brilliant, mate,” Fred said over her.

“Aren’t we going to put them in danger?” Hermione questioned.

“You two have been missing for weeks. I don’t think they will mind us coming to stay for awhile. It will set Mum’s mind to rest at least. The Death Eaters can’t get to Bill and Fleur’s or even Auntie Muriel’s. They’re both under the Fidelius Charm.”

“Who’s the Secret Keeper?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Mum,” answered Fred. “She would rather die than give up the whereabouts any of her kids, believe me.”

“I know,” Hermione agreed. “I only asked because she will have to be the one who gives us the address of the locations.”

George smiled. “We’re ahead of you for once.” He held up two small strips of parchment one from each pocket. “She sent us with these. They have the address to both houses.”

“Ohhhh….That was really dangerous,” Hermione gasped. Then looked down at the parchment.

“It’s blank,” Harry complained.

“Oops… must have mixed them up,” George said taking them back and crossing his arms so the one that had been in Hermione’s hand now lay in Harry’s. There, now in somewhat, messy, loopy scrawl were two addresses, Shell Cottage, and Barchester Manor.

“Bill and Fleur's is Shell Cottage. You’ve met Auntie Muriel. Can you imagine that old hag living in any place called a cottage?” Fred explained.

Harry snorted in amusement.
“That’s not a very nice thing to say about your aunt.” Hermione chastised, though it was lighter than her normal rebuking tone.

The old woman hadn’t approved of the girl for whatever reason, remarking about her skinny ankles. For the life of him. Harry couldn’t understand why the comment bothered Hermione so much.

“We don’t have a choice about going now. We need to find out what’s so special about that painting. Why would Dumbledore give it to her?”

“And why Luna’s doesn’t move,” added George.

Fred took the first shift watching the tent in case some unexpected guest were to make their appearance. The nice thing about having four people once again meant they could do shorter shifts and rest a bit easier at night.

They packed the tent at first light. Harry want to do nothing more than set the bit of saggy canvas and poles alight but Hermione insisted they might need it again in the near future. Harry wasn’t the only one who wasn’t pleased to hear that argument, though none fought her on it. They all knew she was right.

The warm sea breeze that hit as they arrived at the edge of the wards to Shell Cottage carried with it the promise of spring and new beginnings. All they need to do, find the last Horcrux and bring an end to the current unpleasant chapter.
Fleur was the first out of the small cottage to greet the four young people. She issued them into the kitchen making sure they wiped their feet before they entered. The room was full of the smell of freshly baked goods.

Harry looked for the source of the smell. Luna stood in front of the oven taking out a tray of croissants. She either hadn’t noticed the guests’ arrival or did not care as she continued with what she was doing unphased.

“It smells wonderful,” Harry told her.

She acknowledged their presence for the first time with a smile and a low, “Hullo Harry.” She placed the tray on the counter. Half her front was covered in pastry flour.

“Just Harry? What about the rest of us? What are we, dragon liver?” Fred demanded in mock anger.

“Oh, well, you know Fred, we don’t have the same priority as the Chosen One there. We just have to settle for getting something to eat,” George informed his twin.

“Zere is too much food here, eat,” Fleur encouraged the twins leading them and Hermione into the dining room.

Harry ignored the twins banter as he stood locked in place in the small kitchen. He gave Luna a warm smile as she walked over to him. His lips met hers in a kiss, both trying to convey all the emotion they could not find the words for. They surfaced some moments later. Harry resting his forehead on hers.

“I’ve missed you,” he told her.

“And I you,” she said.

Luna ran a finger along his neck. Harry flinched as she traced where the necklace had dug into his skin as it tried to drown him in the lake.

“There was dark magic here,” Luna observed moving her finger over his neck once more.

“Yeah,” Harry admitted. “I was a bit of an idiot and decided that taking a dip with a Horcrux around my neck was a good idea.”

Luna said nothing as she continued to touch the skin on his neck.

“How did you know that? About the necklace I mean,” Harry asked as he gently pulled her hand away from his neck.

“All magic leaves a mark, dark magic especially,” Luna said her hands at her side.

Harry rubbed at the spot on his neck. The mark of where the necklace had dug into his skin was no longer visible. It had faded within a few hours of George pulling him out of the lake.

“Did you destroy what did this,” Luna asked making a move to touch his neck again.
“Yeah,” Harry said grabbing her hand before it could touch his neck again. He wasn’t sure how he felt about her being able to sense what had happened there. “We still have another one to destroy too.”

“Another what,” Bill asked coming into the kitchen.

Harry froze. He hadn’t meant for Bill or Fleur to know anything about what they had been doing for the better part of the last year.

“If it’s a dark artifact, I can help,” Bill offered when Harry didn’t respond. “I was a pretty good curse breaker,” the tall redhead made a wide sweeping motion, “before all this.”

“I know,” Harry finally replied. “We’ve got it. Thanks.”

Bill frowned in disapproval. “Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

Harry nodded with a sad sigh, “Yeah.” Before the older wizard could say anything Harry spoke again, “Dumbledore didn’t want anyone else to know about it. I shouldn’t have told Hermione, or the twins either... But they couldn’t have come with me without knowing what we were doing.”

Bill shrugged, “Dumbledore certainly liked his secrets.”

Harry gave him a weak smile, “Tell me about it.”

“If there is something dark here, I would prefer you get rid of it as soon a possible,” Bill requested.

“Certainly,” Harry agreed.

Harry walked hand in hand with Luna into the dining room. Everyone was sitting around a light colored wooden table. Hermione sat with a cup of coffee in front of her picking at one of the many different kinds of pastry on the table. Fred and George were listening intently to Fleur as she informed them on what they knew of what was going on with the other relatives and fellow Order members. Harry sat down across from George, carelessly pulling Luna into his lap. The blonde didn’t seem to mind as she rested her head on his shoulder, occasionally adding to Fleur’s description of events.

When all had eaten their fill they were shown to rooms upstairs. Hermione was to share with Luna. Fred and George in one room, Harry had the smallest of the rooms to himself. He hadn’t been so grateful to have a real bed since Professor Snape had picked him up from that cabin out on the rocks the night of his eleventh birthday before taking him to Diagon Alley for the first time.

Harry fell into an uneasy sleep. His dreams were filled with nightmare visions of Voldemort of entering the cave. Harry watched as he pulled up the boat and crossed the lake, the potion was vanished away to reveal an empty stone basin. He screamed in anger.

“Harry,” a panicky Hermione screamed.

Harry opened a bleary green eye. Hermione stood just above him, her bushy brown hair falling into her face.

“You were screaming,” George informed Harry.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled as he sat up on his bed.

“Don’t worry about it, mate. Do you want to tell us about it?” George asked.
Harry looked uncertainly at the door.

“Bill and Fleur are still asleep,” Fred answered the unasked question.

“He’s looking for the Horcruxes, making sure they’re still there. He was in the cave,” Harry said rubbing at his neck. “He knows that one is gone. It’s only a matter of time before he checks on the other ones. We need to destroy the cup as soon as possible.”

“I’ll leave that one to you,” Fred said stepping back.

Harry frowned at his friend's action.

“I’ve had enough with possessed objects trying to kill me. I would rather face a dozen Death Eaters than one of those things again,” Fred explained.

“I’m with him,” George said jerking his finger back at his brother.

Harry sighed.

“I’ll do it,” Hermione said squeezing Harry’s hand.

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said with a slight sigh of relief.

“Do you want to do it now?” Fred asked.

“There’s no reason to wait. Bill wanted us to get rid of it as soon as possible,” Harry agreed with a shrug.

“You told Bill about the Horcruxes,” Hermione demanded scandalized.

Harry shook his head, “Not really. I said we were doing something for Dumbledore. He wanted to know if it was a dark object. I said yes, and then he said if that was the case, he would like it if we got rid of it as soon as possible. If You-Know-Who is looking for them we should probably get rid of the one we have.”

Hermione gave Harry’s hand another squeeze. She disappeared down the hall, he figured it was to get her beaded bag that held the cup along with all their other belongings. He pulled on his shoes and a coat. She was waiting for him in the hall, the box Luna had given him for his birthday in one hand, in the other she had the Sword of Gryffindor. He followed her downstairs. She stopped at the kitchen.

“Outside,” Harry advised. “I don’t want to accidentally burn down the house or something.”

Harry opened the door for her as Hermione wordlessly complied with his request. The breeze off the ocean was cool as it blew the hair off Harry’s face. The wind cutting through his jacket, he wished he had put a sweater over his pajamas before they came out here. Hermione couldn’t hide the shiver as another gust caught them.

“Let’s hurry up and get this done,” Harry encouraged. He held out his hand.

“What do you want,” Hermione asked.

“The box,” Harry answered, he said gesturing for it again.

Hermione looked down to the box in her hand.
“I’m just going to take the cup out and set it up for you,” Harry explained. “I won’t take it. I promise.”

Hermione nodded and offered him the desired item. Harry flipped open the lid of the box. He could feel a faint heartbeat emanating from the cup as his fingers wrapped around the cool gold. He refused to let his unease show on his face as he pulled it out and set it on the ground.

“Like I told the twins, don’t be surprised if it tries to fight back,” Harry warned.

Hermione nodded. Her fingers were white under her grip on the hilt of the sword. She came closer so she stood next to Harry.

“You should be able to just stab it,” Harry told her.

She raised the sword to her just above her head and jabbed the sword straight down. There was a scream like that Harry heard in the Chamber of Secrets and when the twins destroyed the cup. A gust of wind knocked Harry and Hermione off their feet and then it was gone. The sword fell out of Hermione’s hand with the force of hitting the sand. The cup was still smoking as the two got back to their feet.

“Is that it?” Hermione asked.

Harry frowned, “I don’t know. Maybe we should stab it again, just to be safe.”

“Okay,” Hermione agreed, “where’s the sword?”

Harry cocked his head to the side, “What do you mean?”

“What did you do with the sword?” Hermione demanded.

“What do you mean what did I do with it? You had it last. It’s not where you fell?” Harry asked.

Hermione pointed to where she landed. There was an outline of Hermione’s body that showed where she had laid, the sword was nowhere in sight.

“And you didn’t pick it up,” Harry asked.

“Why would I be asking you what you did with it if I had it,” Hermione snapped.

“Shit” Harry swore into the night. “It’s gone.”

“Gone, gone where,” Hermione demanded.

“To where it rightfully belongs,” Harry replied.

Hermione fixed him with a curious look. Harry pushed his hair out of his face.

“The goblin at the bank said something about how the sword, the real sword would stay with us for as long as we needed it,” Harry explained.

“We still need it. We still have to kill the snake and find the other Horcrux that belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor,” Hermione argued.

Harry shrank into himself, “I know. I don’t know what to say, Hermione. The sword is gone.”

“How do we get it back,” Hermione asked.
“I don’t know,” Harry said again. He stood, brushing the sand off his knees.

“Where are you going,” Hermione asked.

“Back to bed,” Harry answered, he was too tired for this now.

“We need to figure out how we are going to get the Sword of Gryffindor back,” Hermione insisted.

“Not now Hermione,” Harry snapped. “I’m tired. You’re tired. Everyone is going to be worried that the damn cup almost killed us in the middle of the bloody night. We can deal with it in the morning.”

Hermione opened her mouth as if to speak then shut it thinking better of it. Harry breathed a sigh of relief at the girl’s silence. He ignored Fred and George’s questions as he came back into the kitchen. He continued straight back upstairs to the tiny room he called his own. He flopped onto the bed his glasses and shoes still on.

Harry shifted in his sleep as gentle fingers slowly pulled his glasses from his half-buried face. His nose was filled with the floral scent of a girl’s shampoo and a subtle sagging in the mattress as some crawled in beside him.

“Luna,” he mumbled in his barely awake state pulling the girl closer to his body. They had been dealt a major setback with the disappearance of the sword. There were still two more Horcruxes out there not including Harry or Voldemort, one of which they had no idea what it was. The other was always in the presence of the most dangerous wizard to ever live. Even with that being the case, Harry realized they had faced darker times.

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The four of them had been at Shell Cottage for a few weeks went the fireplace roared to life to deposit a dusty Remus on the hearth rug. The appearance of the werewolf caught all the residents off-guard.

“Is everything okay Remus,” Hermione asked helping her former professor to his feet.

“It’s wonderful,” the man said with an ear-splitting grin.

Hermione stepped back. There was a heavy scent of alcohol coming off the werewolf.

“What’s happened Remus,” Harry asked.

“It’s a boy,” Remus said clapping Harry on the shoulder.

“A boy,” Harry said with a puzzled look. “Tonks had the baby?”

“Theodore Remus Lupin,” Remus confirmed, “My Teddy.” He pulled out a photograph from the inside pocket of the worn robes he was dressed in. Tonks’ hair lay in her bed; her brown hair was damp and stuck to her forehead. There was a tiny baby with a shock of turquoise hair resting on his mother’s chest.

“He’s a Metamorphmagus,” Harry observed.

“Just like his mum,” Remus said proudly. He swayed slightly where he stood.
“Let’s get you a cup of coffee, Remus,” Fred said sitting the new father down at the table.

“Remus is…” Hermione began. “Is Tonks’ ability…”

“He’s perfect,” Remus said cutting her off. “He’s completely perfect. I didn’t pass on my curse.”

There was a collective sigh of relief around the room.

“That’s fantastic Remus,” Bill said, voicing everyone’s opinion for them.

Fred placed a strong cup of coffee in front of Remus. The man took a large sip, grimacing slightly at the taste.

“Harry,” Remus said seriously after another sip of coffee.

Harry’s emerald eyes matched the amber of the werewolf.

“I want you to be godfather,” Remus continued.

“Me,” Harry repeated.

“Yes,” Remus confirmed. “I can’t think of who would do a better job.”

Harry swallowed thickly. He knew he wouldn’t survive the end of this war. He would have to die for Voldemort to die. He couldn’t look at Remus and tell him no.

“You’re supposed to say yes,” George teased.

Harry nodded, “Of course, I will.”

The kitchen was filled with happy conversation about how Tonks and the baby were doing. Harry sat silently at the table brooding over this new development. Harry hoped Remus would forgive him for leaving his son without a godfather. He hoped that Teddy would be too young to know the pain of losing him.

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“Will you please sit down,” Fred begged as Harry made another lap in front of the fireplace in Shell Cottage.

“We’ve been here six weeks and are no closer to knowing why Dumbledore left Luna the painting, or where the last Horcrux is,” Harry complained as he turned to continue in his pacing.

“We have a good idea where the last Horcrux is,” George corrected. “We are pretty sure that’s it’s still in Hogwarts. Even You-Know-Who won’t go to try and check on that one before he has to.”

“Fine,” Harry conceded. “How are we supposed to get our hands on something in the castle? And what’s so bloody important about the painting?”

“We don’t know Harry,” Hermione said with mild annoyance. The painting and its subject had become one of the boy’s most recent obsessions.

“I just wish we had the painting,” Harry sighed.
“I’m sorry,” Luna apologized. “I didn’t want the nargles to steal it out of Ravenclaw Tower.”

“I know,” Harry sighed. “Did she ever say anything about Dumbledore or Horcruxes?”

It was a question he had asked her before and the answer had always been no. There was no reason the answer should change today.

“She talked to me about goats and helping Abe with them,” Luna answered the same way she had before.

George scoffed. Harry turned to look at the other boy.

“What,” George demanded.

“What’s so funny,” Hermione asked softly.

George shrugged, “Just me and Fred know a wizard named Abe that was obsessed with goats.”

“Who,” Harry and Hermione demanded together.

“It’s just the crazy old barman of at the Hogshead in Hogsmeade,” George answered.

“The barman of the Hogshead,” Hermione repeated, defeated.

“You said he was obsessed with goats?” Harry asked his brow furrowed.

“Yeah, he even had a couple that would wander around the yard, one even came inside,” Fred confirmed. “Is that important?”

Harry removed the well paged through copy of The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.

“What’s that load of tosh have to do with anything,” George said with a sigh.

Harry ignored the comment flipping through the pages in search for something. He placed a finger under one of the pages. He continued to look for something else going through more pages.

“Harry,” Hermione asked.

“One minute,” Harry said going back a page or two. “Here it is,” he said victoriously.

“Here what is,” inquired Fred.

Harry read out loud, “The far less talented brother of the mighty Albus Dumbledore, Aberforth Dumbledore began Hogwarts in the fall of 1896. He was nearly expelled in his third year for conducting spells on goats. This unnatural tendency would follow him into adulthood as he was sanctioned several times by the Ministry of Magic for casting charms on goats. It was only the intervention of his famous brother Albus that stopped Aberforth from being sent to Azkaban. The two brothers haven’t spoken since the funeral of their younger sister Ariana see chapter 13 for further detail.” Harry turned the book to face the others in front of him, turning to the first page that he marked with his finger.

“That’s Aberforth,” Harry said jabbing the picture of the Dumbledore family. The boys were a few years apart in age, with matching old-fashioned haircut that ended on their shoulders. “Is that the Abe you know?”

Fred and George looked at one another. Fred cocked his head to the side.
“Add about a hundred years to the face, and a bread that comes down to his waist,” Fred mumbled. “What do you think, George?”

George mirrored the motion in the opposite direction, “It might be.”

“Then we know where we’re going next,” Harry said slamming the book shut.

“What are you talking about,” Hermione demanded of the bespectacled boy.

“We need to go and talk to this Abe,” Harry answered as if it was obvious. “If he is Aberforth Dumbledore he might know why his brother would have left us the painting.

“Harry,” Hermione said anxiously. “Going to Hogsmeade, that’s insane. Do you want another repeat of what happened in Godric’s Hollow?”

“Of course not,” Harry snapped. “But what else are we supposed to do? We know that the last Horcrux has to be somewhere in the castle. We just need to find it.”

“It was where all lost things are,” Luna said twirling her hair absent mindedly around the tip of her wand.

“Where all lost things are,” Hermione said confused looking at the blonde girl.

“Of course,” Luna said with a wide smile. “Where else would it be?”

“What does that even mean,” Hermione demanded clearly frustrated. “Even if we find out about the painting I don’t see how that will do us any good about getting into the castle. “If we get into the castle, You-Know-Who is sure to find out about it. If we go, we need to be prepared to face You-Know-Who.”

“I know,” Harry agreed. “We’re not going to be able to achieve anything here,” he said motioning to their surroundings.

“We need to plan,” Hermione argued.

“When has anything you ever planned actually worked,” Fred asked leaning casually in his chair. “We’ve always gotten by on luck. Just look at our trip to save Sirius or the getting the necklace from that toad.”

“The trip to save Sirius was a disaster,” Hermione argued. “We didn’t even get the prophecy that the Death Eaters wanted.”

“It could have been even worse. It was a miracle that none of us died,” George countered.

“Do we have any more of the Felix?” Harry asked hopefully.

George shook his head. “The Ministry lot raided the store after the bank. They destroyed the batch.”

“Are we sure they destroyed it?” Hermione asked worriedly.

Fred nodded. “It was spilled all over the floor in the workshop. I’m not sure they recognized it or if they didn’t want to risk taking it if it was improperly made.”

Harry sighed, “We could have used a bit more luck.”

“I don’t think we could have risked the use of it again,” Hermione said contemplating the
possibilities.

“What because of the “giddiness or risky behavior?” Fred asked curiously.

Hermione nodded.

“I don’t know about you but I would rather face You-Know-Who with a little luck on my side, side effects or no,” George said.

“It could put you at greater risk,” Hermione argued.

“It doesn’t matter since we don’t have any,” Harry interjected effectively putting an end to the discussion.

“When are we going?” Luna asked.

“We,” Harry repeated. “You’re not coming.”

“Harry Potter you can’t stop me from returning to the school with you. You need me. I know where Ravenclaw’s diadem is,” Luna said firmly.

There was a gasp as the others realized what the girl had said.

“You know where Ravenclaw’s diadem is?” Hermione asked awestruck.

“It was where all lost things were,” Luna said once again.

“Luna it’s been missing since the time of the Founders. How did you find it?” Hermione wondered.

“Why didn’t you tell us,” Harry demanded before Luna could answer Hermione’s question. “We’ve been trying to figure out what the Horcrux could be for weeks. You knew it could be something that belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor.”

“I’ve said that it was at Hogwarts,” Luna answered back. “You never asked me about it.”

“Fine,” Harry sighed. He wasn’t pleased that his girlfriend hadn’t told him something so important.

“When do we go?” Fred inquired.

“Tonight,” Harry said decisively.

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The five teens Apparated into the village of Hogsmeade at the end of the high street. The night was filled with the screams of a Caterwaul Charm. The air was far too cool for the evening in early May. A group of dementors swooped down on them.

“Damn it,” George swore.

Without a second thought, Harry raised his wand and yelled, “Expecto Patronum!” The familiar silver doe rushed into the night driving the collection of dementors back into the darkness.

The young people looked around their surroundings trying to determine where should they go.
“Get in here,” an old man snapped coming out of the Hogshead Tavern. The group rushed into the establishment. The bar looked like no one had visited it in over a decade, the amount of dust covering the old wooden tables. The bartender led them past the bar into a shabby set of rooms where he must live.

Harry sat down on one of the ancient, threadbare chairs. Fred and George stood behind him on either side. Luna and Hermione sat next to one another on a sofa just as old and worn as the chair Harry sat in.

There was a banging on the door of the bar. “Stay here,” the man ordered. He closed the door, they could hear him muttering something from the other side, then nothing.

“Look,” Hermione urged, pointing to the painting that hung above the fireplace. It was a painting of the same girl from Luna’s portrait, possibly a few years older. There was a distance in the girl’s gaze that hadn’t existed in the younger girl. She appeared to be lost in her own world.

“We’re in the right place then,” Harry observed.

The old man returned a few minutes later, his arms filled with bottles of Butterbeer, one for each of his guests. Harry took his and looked back to the painting above the fireplace.

“Who was it,” Hermione asked.

“Just a ruddy group of Death Eaters,” the man said passing her a bottle. She took it wordlessly.

“They know your Patronus, boy.” He looked darkly at Harry. “I was able to convince them it was mine though. A doe and a goat are close enough with a Confundus thrown in.”

“Who is she,” Harry asked gesturing to the painting.

“Ariana, my younger sister,” the old man answered.

“So, you’re Aberforth Dumbledore,” Harry concluded, “younger brother to Albus.”

The old man’s face soured at the use of his full name, or possibly the mention of his infamous brother. Still, he nodded in verification.

“She was very pretty,” Luna observed. “The headmaster left me another painting of her in his will.” Aberforth scoffed at that. Luna continued to speak, “She said that she used to like taking care of the goats with you, Abe.”

Aberforth looked up at this, “She did. She did. The mighty Albus never understood it. He always wanted to hide her away. Just like Mother and Father always did. She deserved better than that.”

“What happened to her,” Hermione asked gently. “It says in the book she was in poor health.”

“She wasn’t, not ‘til those Muggles attacked her,” Aberforth growled. “She was scared and lashed out. Father made them pay for what they did. They took him away for what he did and poor Ariana was never same.”

“That’s why she never went to Hogwarts but... errr…” Harry began uncertainly. “We saw her grave she died when she was only a little kid.”

“At the hands of my great brother,” Aberforth said with disdain. “He was too focused on his new friend and how wonderful the two of them could be. He wanted to go and search for a bloody legend. He didn’t want to be responsible for anyone or anything. We fought. The sounds must have
scared Ariana. I don’t know what happened. Albus’ new friend, Gerhart was in the way… Then Ariana fell.”

The four young people sat there wordlessly. There was nothing they could say that would dull the ache of the hundred years of grief the old man in front of the man.

“My brother didn’t even care she died. He was ready to leave as soon as the funeral was over,” Aberforth continued. “He didn’t care for her at all. He was relieved she was gone. He never regretted what happened.”

“That’s not right,” objected Harry. “I was with Professor Dumbledore when he died. Before it, he had to take a potion, a horrible potion. He kept begging forgiveness. He regretted what happened every day of his life,” Harry insisted.

Aberforth made a noise of disbelief. The room fell silent once more. There was a knocking causing all the occupants to jump.

“What’s that,” Fred demanded as his twin yelled, “Where’s that coming from?”

The old man crossed the room and swung his sister’s portrait out of the way. There was a tunnel behind it rather like the one that led to the cellar of Honeydukes or to the Shrieking Shack. A figure dressed in black robes jumped down onto the floor from the tunnel.

“Neville,” Hermione shrieked as soon as the boy raised his face for her to see.

“Hi Hermione,” Neville said. His round face was marred with bruises. It looked as if his nose had been broken at least once as well.

“What happened Neville,” George demanded.

“It’s not important,” Neville dismissed. When he spoke, Harry could see several teeth had been knocked out.

“Like Hell, it isn’t,” Fred said looking at the other boy’s face. “You look like you went seven rounds with that jinxed Bludger that tried to kill Harry.”

Neville waved him off, “It’s not that bad, Seamus is worse.”

“Neville,” Hermione pleaded.

Neville shrugged, “I guess I pushed the limits a bit too far.”

“What do you mean,” Harry asked.

Neville looked up at the ceiling trying to think of a way to explain it. “Things have been pretty horrible this year.”

“Of course they have with that bloody bat in charge,” George commented.

Harry and Hermione sent him a silent glare, George only shrugged.

“Snape hasn’t been the worst of it,” Neville protested. “Everyone was really surprised when all we got was detention with Hagrid for trying to steal the Sword of Gryffindor. Seamus was certain the Carrows would put us under the Cruciatitus Curse for that one.”

Hermione gasped. “That’s illegal.”
“Not anymore,” Neville said casually. “They cursed Lavender with it last week when she wouldn’t use it on a first-year that was caught out after hours.” Changing the subject, he continued, “We should hurry the others will be waiting for us.”

“Others,” Harry asked.

“Of course,” Neville said with a smile that displayed all of his missing teeth.

“Who’s everyone?” George asked.

“How are we supposed to get there?” Fred asked.

“We’ll go back up the tunnel to the school. That’s where everyone’s been waiting,” Neville said ignoring George’s question. The beaten teen turned to the old man still sitting in his seat. “There will be a few people coming soon. You’ll let them in won’t you Abe?”

Harry noted there was a new air of confidence in his friend. He stood taller and prouder than Harry had ever seen him before. He had to wonder what Mrs. Longbottom would have to say about this when she saw him next.

“This isn’t a bloody train station boy,” the bartender grumbled but made no further objection.

Neville climbed back up behind the painting with a complete lack of grace. Harry gave Luna a boost so she could reach Neville’s outstretched hand. They repeated the process with Hermione and the twins. Fred and George laid down side-by-side to grab Harry and pull him into the tunnel.

“What have you been waiting for,” Harry finally asked as they walked down the low-ceilinged tunnel.

“You, of course,” even standing behind him Harry could hear the smile in the other boy’s voice.

“Why have you been waiting for me,” Harry asked slightly confused.

“We knew you would come back,” Neville insisted. “We knew you were going to help us get rid of the Death Eaters, Snape and all.”

Harry shook his head. “Neville,” he sighed, “I wish we were.”

Neville stopped walking and demanded, “Then why are you back?”

“There’s a Horcrux in the school. The last one, other than Nagini,” Harry told him flatly.

In the dim light, Harry could see the color drained from the bruised visage of boy’s face. “Are you sure,” Neville pleaded that it was not true.

“Certain,” Harry confirmed.

“Does he know,” Neville asked.

“Probably,” Harry confirmed. “I know he’s checked on the others. He hasn’t come to the school that I know about.”

“We would have heard about that,” Neville agreed. “Do you have any idea where the Horcrux is?”

“It was where all things are hidden,” Luna answered for them.
“It’s in the Room of Requirements,” Neville asked.

Luna smiled at him.

“That’s what the bloody Hell she’s meant this whole time? How in the name of Merlin did we not figure that out?” An exasperated Fred demanded of no one in particular.

Harry fought back a snort of amusement, “Of course, it was. Why didn’t you just say that?” Harry asked her softly.

“You need to listen to what is being said Harry Potter, not just what you wish to hear,” Luna advised sagely.

Harry frowned at the comment. He wasn’t sure what she meant by that. He had a feeling there was something he was missing.

The tunnel climbed steeply upward as it drew near the end. This end, like the last, was covered by a portrait, the one Dumbledore had bequeathed to Luna in his will.

“Thank you for all of your help,” Luna told Ariana when they exited. Ariana gave her a mischievous smile and began to spin once more.

Harry was looking around the room to which they had left. There were banners decorating the room from three of the four Hogwarts houses, only Slytherin was missing. There were a large number of bunk beds scattered throughout the room. There were mismatched chairs, tables, and robes in every color of the rainbow. It seemed like half the students fourth year and above were hiding in the room.

“What is all this,” Harry asked gob smacked.

“Welcome to Dumbledore’s Army,” Ginny said coming to the front of the crowd. “We thought about changing the name but it didn’t seem right with him around.” She pointed to red and gold bird the size of a swan that sat on a perch next to a large grey cactus that Harry recognized to be Neville’s Mimbulus Mimbletonia.

“Is that Fawkes,” Hermione asked shocked.

The familiar had not been seen since the previous headmaster’s funeral. Neville nodded.

“When did he show up,” Harry asked walking over to say hello to the phoenix.

“A couple of weeks ago, not long after I moved in here,” Neville said coming to stand with Harry.

“You’ve been living here for weeks,” Fred said looking around. “Why?”

Neville pointed at his face. “It wasn’t safe for me anymore. I guess I pushed the limits a bit too far. My blood status wasn’t enough for the trouble I was causing.”

“Why would Fawkes come to you,” Hermione questioned.

“I’m not sure,” Neville said with a small sigh.

“Dumbledore said he came to me in the Chamber of Secrets because I displayed an act of incredible loyalty to Dumbledore,” Harry said petting the hand over the bird’s red and gold plumage.

Neville shrugged, “Maybe that was it.”
“I’m sure it was,” Ginny agreed. “The last thing he did before went into hiding in here was to paint in an irremovable paint, “Long Live Albus Dumbledore, Greatest Headmaster Ever to Live.”

“Excellent,” Fred and George said together.

“We’re not here to talk about me though,” Neville said.

Harry couldn’t help but notice how the boy deflected the attention away from himself once again. Even with the new-found confidence, Neville did not like being the center of attention and seemed to think less of himself than he deserved. Harry cursed Mrs. Longbottom’s overbearing nature once again.

“Why are you here,” Seamus demanded.

“Are we going to throw out the great bat?” Dean asked.

“No,” Harry said. “We’re here looking for something, something that belongs to You-Know-Who. We need to find it.”

“Do you have any idea where it is,” Ginny asked.

“Here,” Harry said motioning to the room.

“Here,” Lavender said confused.

“He hid it in the Room of Requirements ages ago, back when he was a student or maybe when he came to try and get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job,” Harry explained.

“We’ll have to leave it so you can search it,” Parvati complained.

“I know,” Harry agreed.

“You won’t,” Luna protested.

“Luna,” Hermione chided. “We can’t have the room show us the place where he hid the diadem if there are people still in the room.”

“It’s not there,” Luna said airily.

“What do you mean it’s not there,” demanded George. “You kept saying it’s in the place where all things were hidden. That’s the bloody Room of Requirements. So, if it’s not here, where the bloody Hell are we supposed to go.”

Harry was frowning at his girlfriend. “It was in the room but it’s not anymore.”

Luna smiled at him.

“Where do we go?” Harry asked.

The room was filled with the magically enhanced voice of the Potions Master turned headmaster. “All students and staff will report to the Great Hall immediately.”

“What do you think that is all about,” Fred asked.

“He must know we’re here,” Hermione concluded.
“What and he thinks Harry’s just going to walk into the Great Hall like a good boy so You-Know-Who can murder him where he stands?” George asked.

“If I’m here it won’t be long before You-Know-Who comes. There is going to be a fight. The teachers will want to get the students out of the castle.” Harry told him.

“You think Snape will let them leave,” Neville asked.

“Snape wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt that doesn’t have to,” Harry insisted.

Seamus made a sound of disagreement. “The slimy git has been letting us take beatings all year long.”

“He can’t look like he isn’t a Death Eater,” Hermione argued.

“Whatever,” grumbled Ron. “What do you want us to do?”

“We need time to get to where the object is hidden,” Harry said. “We need as many people as we can to come and help us fight.”

“We’re already on that,” Neville informed Harry.

Harry’s eyebrow’s shot into his hairline in surprise.

“Fawkes let us know the minute you were in the village,” Neville said with a smile. “We put out the word on Potterwatch and with these,” he held up his old DA coin. “We’ve been able to use them to communicate with the other members of the DA who’ve left school.”

As if on time the portrait of Ariana Dumbledore swung open once again, Mrs. Weasley followed by Charlie and Percy. Bill and Fleur were only moments behind her. Then there was every person Harry had ever played with on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Krum landed awkwardly on the floor as he stumbled out of the tunnel.

“Remus,” Harry said smiling at the werewolf. The man pulled Harry into a hug.

“Harry,” Dean asked.

“We’ll need to buy some time so we can find,” Harry started to say, but Luna interjected, “I know exactly where it is Harry Potter.” Harry corrected himself, “So we can get to the thing and destroy it.”

More people had come through the painting, Cho Chang, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mrs. Longbottom (“Gran,” Neville exclaimed excitedly. “You look dreadful dear,” Mrs. Longbottom observed as she placed a liver-spotted hand to the boy’s bruised face), and Aberforth.

“Wotcher,” Tonks greeted the teen as she stepped out from behind her husband.

“Dora,” Remus protested, “You can’t be here.”

“I’m an Auror, Remus. This is my job,” Tonks snapped at her husband.

“No, you are a mother. Someone needs to be there for Teddy,” Remus complained.

“You can go back,” Tonks offered. “I am staying to fight.” She crossed her arms over her chest stubbornly.
“Dora,” Remus pleaded. “He needs his mother.”

“And his father,” Harry added. “You both should go back.”

Remus shook his head, “He doesn’t need me. His life would be easier if I were not there to embarrass him.”

“Stop talking rubbish again,” Fred said. “Either you both go back home or you both fight, which ever you like, just stop being such a noble arse, Remus. Any kid should count themselves lucky to call you dad, furry little problem or no.”

The pink haired Auror chuckled at this. The frown across her husband’s brow lightened slightly, if only for a moment.

“Now let’s get out there and start causing a distraction, buy Harry and the lot the time they need,” George said with a grin.

Neville stood at the door of the Room of Requirements, the Marauders’ Map in hand, watching for any unwanted teachers or students in the area. Like at the end of a DA meeting he was letting out a few people at a time so they could blend in with the crowds of students making their way to the Great Hall. Those who were too young to fight would leave with the other students, the rest would join the teachers in their defense of the school.

“Harry,” Hermione said getting the boy’s attention as he instructed Seamus and Dean on how they could be of use at the bridge.

“We’ll do it, Harry. Don’t you worry,” Seamus promised.

“I know you can,” Harry said with a smile.

“We know where we have to go,” Hermione informed him.

“Excellent,” Harry said looking expectantly at Hermione. When she didn’t speak, Harry said, “Well?”

“The Ravenclaw common room,” Luna answered.

“A piece of Voldemort’s soul is in the Ravenclaw common room?” Harry repeated, surprised.

“It wasn’t always there,” Hermione reminded him.

“You moved it,” Harry asked Luna.

“We’ve already established that,” Hermione pointed out.

“I thought Helena might be able to move on if she were to make amends for taking her mother’s diadem,” Luna said.

“Of course,” Harry agreed uncertainly.

“Where do you want us,” Fred asked Harry as he joined the trio by the door.

They were the last five people in the Room of Requirements. The others all heading for positions to prepare for battle or to join the rest of the student body if they were too young to fight.

“You’ll go to the Great Hall, help the professors with the younger students unless McGonagall wants
you elsewhere.”

The twins nodded in unison and disappeared out the door. Harry ran with the girls down the hall and three flights of stairs, encountering no one.

“Potter,” came a yell from above.

Harry turned to see Draco Malfoy half a flight above him. Harry silently cursed the boy’s appearance. The captured wand from Rodolphus Lestrange was in Harry’s hand, ready for a fight. Draco cast the first spell at the three of them. Harry fired back as Luna and Hermione ducked into one of the secret passageways.

“Go,” Harry urged the girls as he ducked another spell from Draco. “Go,” he repeated.

“We’ll meet you in our bathroom,” Hermione yelled back at him as she took Luna’s hand to run.

Harry hissed in pain as a jinx hit his shoulder. “Expelliarmus!” he cried in frustration.

Draco’s hawthorn wand flew out of his slender fingers. Harry let it fall to his feet before he retrieved it and stuck it in his belt. You couldn’t have too many wands on a day like today.

“Our bathroom,” Harry muttered to himself as he left Draco to fade, defenseless into the fighting. What in the world could Hermione possibly mean? Harry continued downstairs. He stopped on the second floor, walking down the hall to the girls’ bathroom. This was where they had spent so much time during their second year. Could she have meant this one?

“What are you doing here?” Moaning Myrtle whined as Harry pushed open the door.

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted.

“They said You-Know-Who wants to kill you,” Myrtle informed Harry.

“He does,” Harry confirmed.

“If you die, you can’t stay here,” Myrtle told him.

“Oh,” Harry said slightly surprised, even though he was glad the girl didn’t want him to spend the rest of his life haunting the girls’ lavatory. His attack on Draco last year must have left a lasting impact.

“They’re preparing for a battle, why are you here,” Myrtle asked again.

“The same reason we had to come here at the end of our second year,” Hermione answered for him as she and Luna entered the bathroom.

“End of our second year, the Chamber of Secrets,” Harry concluded. “You want me to go back to the Chamber?”

“Harry Potter, you are very dense sometimes,” Luna said with a great deal of affection.

“The Sword of Gryffindor absorbed the venom of the basilisk you killed in the Chamber. We can go down and destroy the last Horcrux,” Hermione explained.

“What about Nagini,” Harry asked.

“We can bring back some fangs with us,” Luna said with airy confidence. “We haven’t much time,
you need to open the Chamber for us.”

Harry knelt down next to the sink across from Moaning Myrtle’s stall. He stared at the tiny snake carved into the pipe picturing it to be real as he hissed, “Open up”. It took several tries before it worked. The sinks moved back to reveal the cavernous entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. He had no desire to return, but it was the only chance he could see for them to destroy the Horcrux in hand and in turn, Voldemort.

“I’ll go first,” Hermione volunteered, making Harry breathe a sigh of relief.

Hermione jumped down with only a moment’s hesitation. Luna jumped down as soon as the darkness of the tunnel swallowed Hermione. Harry counted to thirty before plunging into the blackness again. His stomach turned as he landed on the pile of bones. Luna held out a hand to help him to his feet. Harry took it gratefully. He wound his fingers through hers as they walked further into the dark.

“It’s really scary down here,” Hermione observed.

“I know,” Harry agreed, “and this is without the mad snake on the loose.”

Luna squeezed his hand in reassurance. They stopped at the ornate door that led to the Chamber itself until Harry could repeat the set of hissed instructions. The snake on the door slithered back from the lock like real snakes woken to open the door. The door swung back to reveal the intimidating stone chamber.

“Wow,” Hermione breathed.

Harry looked at her in surprise.

“It’s impressive,” Hermione said defensively.

“It is,” Luna agreed.

“You’re both mad,” Harry muttered, mostly to himself.

The girls stopped a few feet away from the sixty-foot skeleton. Harry let go of Luna’s hand and continued to the head. He could see the hole in the skull the sword made when he stabbed it with the Sword of Gryffindor. He tugged on a large fang at the front until it came loose.

“Come here Luna,” Harry called over.

Luna silently came to stand next to Harry. He handed her the fang which she took with no hesitation. The girl didn’t have the diadem. Harry looked back to Hermione. She threw it to him, with the reflexes perfected on the Quidditch pitch, he caught the silver tiara. He set it on the ground before her.

“You can do this,” Harry told her.

“I know Harry Potter,” Luna said matter-of-factly.

Harry fought back a laugh. Luna raised the fang and stabbed the jewel at the center of the diadem. The murky water washed over the three as the piece of Voldemort’s soul died.

“Two more to go,” Hermione observed as she placed more fangs into her beaded bag.

“Two,” Harry repeated slightly confused, “There’s only Nagini left I thought.”
“Nagini and Voldemort,” Hermione clarified.

“Then that means three,” Harry corrected in his mind.

The girls still didn’t know. He couldn’t tell them now. They would know soon enough. He looked around the dark chamber.

“How are we going to get out of here?” He asked.

“How did you the last time,” Luna inquired. Harry had never told about his adventure in the chamber in any great detail.

“Fawkes stuck around after he dropped off the Sorting Hat. He healed my arm from the fang that went through it and then flew us all back up to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. I don’t think he’s coming to help us this time.”

“No,” Hermione said, her brow was furrowed in thought. “I could levitate us up.”

Harry shook his head, “I’ve got a better idea. Kreacher!”

The old house elf appeared before in front of Harry. The fake Horcrux, Regulus’ necklace hung proudly around his wrinkled neck.

“Master Harry is calling Kreacher,” the elf said with a small bow. His low croaky voice echoed in the empty rock cavern.

“We need your help, Kreacher,” Harry explained. “Can you take us back up to the castle?”

“Of course, Master Harry,” Kreacher confirmed. “Where is Master and his friends needing to go?”

“Back to Myrtle’s bathroom is fine,” Harry instructed. “Take Hermione and Luna first.”

“Harry,” Hermione complained.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Harry insisted.

The elf grabbed hold of both girls and disappeared with a creak before Hermione could noise another objection. Kreacher was back in less than a minute. Harry took his knobby hand, grateful, thankful to leave the stone chamber for the last time.

The first thing Harry noticed was the bathroom was brighter when he arrived back.

“What’s that doing here?” Hermione demanded.

Before them stood a glowing silver doe. Harry frowned.

As if to answer their question she began to speak in the rich voice of their former Potions Master. “Potter, the Dark Lord has possession of the Death Stick. It will not work for him.” With that, she vanished.

“Of course, it won’t work for him,” Harry grumbled. “It’s like he thinks I’m an idiot or something.”

“Why won’t it,” Hermione asked.

“We need to get to the Great Hall,” Harry said ignoring the question.
“Why the Great Hall,” Hermione asked.

“I need to talk to Professor Snape,” Harry said answering her question this time.

“You are worried about him,” Luna observed.

Harry nodded. “I have a bad feeling about tonight. I need to warn him.”

“Let’s go,” encouraged Luna.

“One minute,” Harry said looking back to Kreacher. “What are the house elves doing?” Harry asked.

“We is just in the kitchen,” Kreacher said looking up puzzled at Harry.

“Come and join the fight. The castle needs everyone possible to help,” Harry told him.

“Is that an order, Master Harry,” Kreacher asked.

Harry shook his head. “It’s a request. It’s up to you and all the other house elves if you want to fight. It’s your choice.”

The battle for the school must have started while they were down in the Chamber of Secrets. The halls were filled with the sounds of curses, explosions, and screams of both children and adults. Harry watched as Professor McGonagall chased a pair of Death Eaters with a herd of desks. The Death Eaters were knocked down the stairs.

“Professor,” Harry called to the Deputy Headmistress.

“What is it, Potter,” McGonagall demanded. Her hair normally arranged into a tight bun was falling down over her shoulders. Her square-rimmed glasses were knocked askew and a cut was on her forehead.

“Where’s Professor Snape,” Harry asked.

“Severus,” McGonagall asked in surprise. “He’s answered the call of his master.”

“Voldemort?” Harry said in puzzlement.

“Yes Potter,” McGonagall said. “He was called, leaving the castle without a leader.”

“It has a leader,” Harry protested, “you.”

“Voldemort has given us an hour to present you to him, Potter.”

“And if I don’t come,” Harry asked curiously.

“He will attack the school and all those here,” McGonagall answered.

“What do you call this,” Harry asked.

“A warm up,” she said with a faint smile.

“Are you sure he’s on our side,” Seamus yelled as they spotted Professor Snape battling members of the Order of the Phoenix.

From their location on the stairs, they could see the front doors. Harry watched as the man in
question flung a hex in the direction of Professor Flitwick that split and hit both of the Carrows knocking them from their feet. Harry wanted to yell back that he was but another hex nearly hit him. He needed to get closer to the Potions Master. He needed to know his master’s plan. Voldemort would kill him to become the master of the Elder Wand, Harry was certain of it.

Harry dodged another hex from Yaxley this time. The teachers were fighting Death Eaters in the corridors of the school. Snape was leading them in a retreat out of the castle much like he had done the year before. McGonagall shot a spell at the current head master. He ducked at a suit of armor behind him exploded. Snape turned and ran into the night. Harry watched him go across the grounds. He had an idea where he might be headed, why the man would choose to go to the Shrieking Shack at this moment Harry didn’t understand. Harry made to follow.

“Harry,” Hermione called after him, “Where are you going?”

“I have to warn him,” Harry yelled back.

Hermione and Luna followed the boy across the grounds. Snape was too far ahead of them. It was as if he was flying across the grounds. Harry rejected the idea. Nobody could fly without a broom. The man must have used a spell to pause the flailing branches because when Harry reached the tree he did not see one. He cursed the delay was he summoned a branch from the forest long enough to poke the knot and not be hit by any of the limbs.

The short pause was enough time for girls to catch up with Harry. The three ran up down the tunnel as fast as they possibly could in the low tunnel. They did not hear the sound of footsteps in front of them.

Harry did his best to avoid making any sound as he climbed the stairs up to the house above them. The door in the floor was open as it had been when they left the building three years before the night Harry met his godfather for the first time. There were new footprints in the thick dust of the floor showing where Snape had gone.

There was a faint light coming from down the hallway, enough to illuminate two figures in the room in it. Harry crept up the stairs to see better.

“The Cloak,” Hermione urged quietly.

Harry struggled to cover himself in case the two were to notice his head popping out of the floor in the hallway.

“Master,” Snape said, “their resistance is crumbling the school will soon be -”

“- and it is doing so without your help Severus,” Voldemort said in his high clear voice. “Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make the difference. We are almost there...almost.”

“Let me find the boy. Let me bring you, Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please,” Snape begged his master.

“I have a problem, Severus,” Voldemort softly said, his voice no louder than a whisper, but could be perfectly heard over the sounds of the distant battle.

“My Lord,” said Snape.

“Do you know why I have called you back from the battle?” Voldemort asked Nagini floated behind him in an enchanted cage.
“No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter.” Snape’s eyes fixed on the coiling snake.

Voldemort held the Elder Wand in his long-fingered hands, the bone white flesh reflecting in the moonlight. “You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness, you see, his great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will come.”

Snape protest, “But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself—”

“My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends - the more, the better but do not kill him.” Harry could feel Voldemort’s anger starting to boil as pain flared in his scar.

“My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. Potter is a reckless fool. He will put his life in danger if he thinks he can save his friends. The boy trusts me. Let me go and find him, my Lord.”

“So, you can continue your betrayal?” Voldemort hissed.

“My Lord,” Snape stammered, Harry stopped breathing, both had their eyes fixed on the snake as it coiled and uncoiled in its enchanted cage.

“You have been very valuable to be me. Very valuable. But perhaps not as much as you once were or could have been.” Voldemort wove the Elder Wand through his long, pale fingers.

“I don’t understand, my Lord,” Snape said, his head dipped forward, hiding his face behind the curtain of long, greasy, black hair.

“You were at Hogwarts for the last eighteen years, Severus. You saw Potter every day for the last six years,” Voldemort said twisting the wand in his fingers again.

“He was protected, my Lord, by Dumbledore. There was no way I could harm the boy, or bring him to you.” Snape said, his face still pointed at the ground.

“Is that the only reason, Severus,” Voldemort’s voice was harsher that it had been. A hand flew up to cover Harry’s scar as Voldemort’s annoyance flared once again.

“Oh course, my Lord,” Snape said his dark eyes shooting up to look into the death-mask face of the wizard that stood before him.

“I don’t believe you, Severus,” Voldemort said, “Crucio.”

Snape collapsed to the ground, twitching as his body was racked with pain. Harry held his breath. He couldn’t just sit here watching Snape be tortured.

“No Harry,” Hermione ordered, grabbed the ankle that was not covered by the Invisibility Cloak. “We can’t, not yet.”

Harry gave her an invisible nod, but stopped moving, his eyes locked on the prone form of the man before him.

“Even traitors have their uses, Severus,” Voldemort said pacing around. “You killed Dumbledore, the last master of the Elder Wand. With your death, the wand will pass its power to me. I will finally be able to kill Harry Potter.”
The wizard paced around the crumpled form of his once loyal servant. He canceled the spell that encased his familiar. “Kill,” he hissed that the snake. Voldemort watched as Nagini struck Snape in the neck. His servant, no longer useful as a spy, his last use was to make his master the master of the Elder Wand. Voldemort flew out the window with the snake once more around his neck leaving Snape to his fate. The Potion Master collapsed his dark eyes spotting the three teens in the corner of the room. They stood silent and frozen.

Harry watched in horror as the blood spurted from Snape’s neck. The man was dead or would be soon. There was no way he would be able to survive such an attack. He hadn’t had to die. It wasn’t even his damn wand.

Harry couldn’t watch the man take his last few breaths. Harry turned and ran. He could hear Hermione and Luna calling him but he couldn’t understand the words. He didn’t stop running until he reached the Great Hall.

The room was nothing like Harry had ever seen it before. It was filled with the dead, the dying, and the injured. He looked down into the faces of those who would never move again. Colin Creevy, the boy was too young to be here, he must have snuck back with some of the older students who reconsidered. The young Gryffindor looked like a giant next to Dobby. Harry wasn’t surprised the house elf had joined the fight. He wondered who had taken down the brave little elf. Harry knelt down and shut Dobby’s unseeing green eyes. Cho Chang was there a few bodies away, Dean next to Seamus three down from Cho. There were more Harry didn’t recognize. He stopped as he approached the end of the row.

Mrs. Weasley was sobbing hysterically. There was a ginger head held in her lap. Harry could not determine which of the boys it was through the crowd of remaining Weasleys.

“It’s Ron,” Katie Bell informed Harry.

“Ron,” Harry repeated. He felt guilty for the instant of relief he felt at the news. He counted the redheads that were gathered a few feet away. “Who’s missing?”

“Fred,” the former Gryffindor Chaser answered. “The last time anyone saw him he was fighting Crabbe Sr. near the North Tower.”

Harry felt his breath freeze in his chest. Part of the North Tower had collapsed.

“They’re digging people out of there now, but there’s no sign of Fred yet,” Katie said, confirming Harry’s worst fears.

“Thanks,” Harry said numbly. He moved on. Many of the students were hurt, their friends trying to help them. He saw a woman with mousy brown hair with a man’s bloody head resting in her lap. It was Remus, the woman must have been Tonks.

The last of the Marauders was gone. He had just become a father. Teddy would never get to know what a wonderful father he had.

The room was filled with the sound of Voldemort’s cold, clear voice. It was as if the castle itself was speaking. “You have fought bravely. You are to be commended for your efforts. The loss of any
magical life is a waste. In respect, I will call my Death Eaters back for you to collect your dead. Now, I speak directly to Harry Potter. Your friends are dying for you, Harry Potter. I give you one hour to present yourself to me. No more need die, Potter. One hour in the Forbidden Forest.”

Harry could feel the eyes on him. He refused to meet any of them. He couldn’t stand to see the looks of pain or worse, hope. Harry continued his way down the rows of the dead. Harry looked around the gathering in the Great Hall. He didn’t see Hermione anywhere. Luna was with her father, helping him tend to an injured Hufflepuff girl who looked too young to be there. She must have snuck back with Colin Creevey. Neville sat on the floor near the door, his knees drawn up to his chin. Even from a distance, Harry could see the boy’s form was racked with sobs. Harry sank down next to his friend, the closest thing he had ever had to a brother. Mrs. Longbottom’s body to the boy’s other side.

“She was… She stopped Lestrange from hexing me,” Neville explained whipping the tears away from the back of his hand.

Harry nodded mutely. Of course, the woman would have given up her life freely to protect her grandson, the only family she had left. Harry looked at the old woman. Her stern features no more relaxed in death.

“Neville,” Harry said.

Neville sniffed and looked up from his grandmother’s face to Harry.

“Neville,” Harry repeated. “I have to go. I have to put an end to this.”

Neville shook his head in confusion, “Go where?”

“I have to go and meet Voldemort in the woods,” Harry said.

Neville flinched at the sound of the name but said nothing. Harry pushed a lock of hair from his face trying to gather his wits for what he needed to ask next.

“I have to ask you to do something,” Harry said even more seriously.

Neville wiped another batch of tears away from his dirty face. “Anything,” he agreed instantly.

Harry shook his head. “You were so much more than that, Neville. It was you that led them here. If it weren’t for you the school would have fallen a long time ago.” Harry took a deep breath. “It’s the snake. We’re going to have to kill it. It’s the last of the Horcruxes. If the snake doesn’t die, no matter we do Voldemort will not be able to die. Do whatever you have to,” Harry instructed.

Neville nodded. When the other boy didn’t continue, he asked. “What’s the other thing?”
“Huh?” Harry replied distractedly.

“The other thing,” Neville repeated. “You said there were two things that you had to ask me.”

Harry looked around the room, Hermione was not there yet. Harry fought back a shudder at the thought of what might have occurred to separate the girls.

“Harry,” Neville said softly.

The green-eyed boy looked back to Neville.

“What was the other thing,” Neville asked again.

“You’ll look after them all for me, won’t you? The Weasleys, Tonks, and Luna...especially Luna.” Harry requested.

Neville frowned, “Where are you going to be?”

Harry shook his head, “Not here. You’ll make sure they’re all okay? You’ll tell Teddy that I’m sorry I’m leaving him without a godfather?”

“Of course,” Neville agreed. He took a deep breath. “Do you want someone to come with you?”

Harry shook his head. It was starting to feel like that’s all he did.

“Are you sure you want to be alone?” Neville asked.

“I won’t be alone,” Harry said standing.

“Thank you, Harry,” Neville said looking up to the other boy now.

“Thank you,” Harry replied. He walked out of front doors of the school for the last time. One of the large wooden doors hung off its hinges leaving the door open. He continued across the grounds, stopping at the edge of the lake.

Harry pulled the open the mokeskin sack from around his neck and pulled out the golden snitch. He placed the tiny gold ball to his lips once more. “I'm about to die,” he whispered to it. The ball split in half, to show the cracked stone Harry had seen once before in the ring that had led to Albus Dumbledore’s death.

Harry wasn’t sure what to expect as turned over the small black stone three times in his palm. He knew in an instant that it worked. There were the sounds of bodies moving over the forest floor. He looked up to see familiar faces all wearing the same expression, a loving smile.

James was right beside Harry. They two were the same height now. His father still wore the clothes he died in, his glasses askew and hair messily ruffled.

Behind James stood Sirius. The man before him was younger and more at ease than the one Harry had ever known. He wore a Muggle motorcycle jacket, his hands shoved deep into a tight pair of jeans. There was an ease in his movements that Azkaban must have robbed from him.

Mr. Weasley appeared next to Harry on his left. Harry was surprised to see the man, as he took off his horn-rimmed glasses to clean a speck of dirt from the lenses. The man gave Harry a reassuring smile. He was better dressed than the boy had ever seen him in life.

The last to appear was Lily. “Mum,” Harry couldn’t stop himself whispering.
Harry continued to look around as if expecting someone else to make an appearance.

“We are all here,” James informed his son.

Harry did his best not to look disappointed at this statement. Why wouldn’t he have come? Was Professor Snape mad at him? Did he feel Harry was responsible for his death?

“My brave boy,” Lily said as raised a hand to his check but did not touch it. Her words drew Harry back to those who stood around him.

“You’ve done so well,” James said proudly.

“We’re proud of you,” Sirius told him.

Harry shook his head looking from one face to the other, “I didn’t want you to die. Any of you,” Harry choked back unshed tears. “You died to protect me. You shouldn’t have had to.”

“We did so willingly,” James said standing in front of his son.

Harry looked at Mr. Weasley, “You’re family has lost so much already. You, Ron, maybe Fred... they shouldn’t have to lose so much because of me. Mrs. Weasley... she’s been so...”

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley chided, “You didn’t ask us to fight. We volunteered. We knew the risk we were taking. Molly misses us and always will. Even so, she would not have asked us not to do our part.”

“Does it hurt,” Harry was embarrassed to ask but the question was out of his mouth before he realized he had spoken.

“It’s easier and faster than falling asleep,” Sirius answered with a cockeyed grin.

“It’s almost over,” Mr. Weasley reassured. “It will be fast. He wants it to be over.”

Harry nodded, looking to his mother. “You’ll stay with me?”

“Until the very end,” Lily insisted.

“They won’t see you?” Harry asked.

“We’re a part of you,” James explained.

Harry rubbed away the tears coming out from under his glasses. He stared into the woods. He knew that none of them would force him to go. It was up to him to choose. He pulled the Invisibility Cloak out one last time. Pulling it over himself and walking into the woods. He could hear the sounds of James, Lily, Sirius, and Mr. Weasley walking beside him. The Dementors had no effect on him, the presence of his companions acting like that of a Patronus.

Harry had no idea where he was to go in the woods. He stumbled upon two Death Eaters that were on watch.

“Did you hear something?” The first asked. “Do you think it’s Potter?”

“He has an Invisibility Cloak,” the second said in a non-answer. Both looked around unsuccessfully for the anticipated teenage. When they saw and hear nothing more they turned back into the woods.

“He said the boy would come,” the first Death Eater observed.
His companion shrugged, “The hour is up. Let’s go see what the master wants us to do.”

Harry followed silently behind the two. Deeper and deeper they moved into the forest. The woods filled with an eerie silence. Harry was comforted with the presence of his companions giving him the courage to keep going.

They arrived in a clearing that had once been the home of Aragog and his descendants. The webs still clung to the trees. A huge fire burned in the center of the clearing the only source of light in the depth of the forest. Death Eaters stood around it, some still in their masks and robes, others with their faces exposed.

A sound of rustling drew Harry’s attention to the far side of the circle. Hagrid was chained at the wrist to two near by trees. His face was bloodied from the battle.

“I thought he would come,” Voldemort said looking around the clearing.

The Resurrection Stone fell from Harry’s hand as he shoved the Cloak of Invisibility under his robes. His companions fading into the pre-dawn. He didn’t worry. He would see them again soon.

“I thought he would come,” Voldemort said once again. “I must have made a mistake.”

“You didn’t,” Harry said stepping out of the woods.

“What are yeh doin’ Harry,” Hagrid demanded.

Harry ignored the half-giant as he stepped further into the clearing. He his hands were empty, palms out. “I’m ready.”

Harry saw Voldemort’s mouth move and a flash of bright green light and everything went black...

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Harry woke up in pure white fog. He realized he was naked and clean. He wished he had clothes. It was if the thought of clothes created them as a freshly laundered outfit appeared next to him. He pulled on the pair of jeans and shirt. Now dressed he felt comfortable to explore his odd surroundings.

The place was filled with an almost blinding white light. There were benches placed every so many feet apart. Harry could hear something whimpering under one of the distant benches.

“Hello my dear boy,” a voice said behind Harry.

Harry turned to see Dumbledore standing behind him.

“Sir,” Harry greeted. “Where are we,” the teenager asked.

“I was about to ask you the same question,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “This is, as they say, your show.”

Harry looked around again. “It’s sort of like King’s Cross but clean… and no trains.”
“Really,” Dumbledore said looking at the surrounding whiteness. The man motioned for the boy to take a seat, “That maybe as an appropriate as any.”

“What do you mean, sir,” Harry asked.

“You are at a crossing,” Dumbledore explained.

Harry frowned, “I’m not dead?”

“Not exactly,” Dumbledore agreed.

There was a cry again from a broken thing, some ways away. Harry turned to look for the source. “What was that?”

“It is beyond our help, my boy,” Dumbledore said, “pay it no mind.”

Harry nodded. “Sir,” Harry said nervously.

“Yes child,” Dumbledore said encouraging Harry to speak.

“Why did you make it so hard? Everything could have gone so much easier if you hadn’t left us with nothing but riddles.” Harry complained.

“I was hoping to slow you down,” Dumbledore admitted. “I didn’t want you rushing into it before you were ready. I thought including Miss Granger would stop you doing anything too rash. I did not expect Mr. Longbottom to stay behind. He too would have been a good influence on your pacing.”

“Believe it or not, I didn’t want to die before I had to,” Harry said with a shake of his head.

“I did not know that Severus had informed that you would have to die,” Dumbledore said with a note of disapproval.

Harry scoffed. “It’s a good thing he did. If he hadn’t I don’t know if I would have known to come into the forest.”

“You would have, Harry. You would have,” Dumbledore insisted.

“Would I? How was I supposed to know I was a bloody Horcrux?” Harry demanded. “You didn’t tell me. We knew there were supposed to be seven pieces of Voldemort’s soul. There weren’t though, there were eight when you count me.”

“I’m sorry my boy,” Dumbledore said tears coming to his tired blue eyes. “You are right I should have told you. The question was when. When you were eleven, no, that’s far too young for something like that. When you were twelve you face Voldemort a second time and brought to my attention my worst fears, that were pieces of his soul out there keeping him tied to this world. Then at thirteen, you were reunited with your godfather. I could not in good conscience destroy the happiness that you were discovering being away from your family’s care. At fourteen, you had your blood taken and were forced to watch Voldemort return to a body. Your own blood used to regenerate your enemy. At fifteen you lost the closest thing you ever had to a father,” Dumbledore said sadly.

“No,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “I don’t think that’s right.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry over the tops of his half-moon glasses.

“I loved Sirius,” Harry said with a pleading note in his voice. “I cared for him greatly. It’s just he
wasn’t a dad. He was too reckless. He was more concerned about what he wanted to do. He didn’t think about what I might need.”

“You think there was another that did that for you,” Dumbledore asked slightly surprised.

Harry nodded. “He may not have shown it in the same way. Still, he was always there for me when I needed him, even when I didn’t know I did.”

“You are referring to Severus,” Dumbledore realized.

Harry nodded. “I wish I got a chance to tell him so.”

“He knew, Harry, he knew,” Dumbledore reassured.

“How do you know,” Harry asked. There were tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Harry, you were the closest thing Severus had to a son,” Dumbledore said, the old man’s eyes damp once more. “He knew.”

Harry shook his head, “I never listened. I never said how much I appreciated how he looked after me.”

“He was used to that sort of treatment. We often take advantage of those who are with us. It is only after that we recognize their loss. A parent knows this and does what they do out of love nonetheless.”

“Some dads love their kids more than others,” Harry said to his shoes.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said looking at the boy. “Severus put his life on the line every single day to keep you safe. He may never have said the words, but he cared for you.”

“I know,” Harry said kicking out at the air under the bench.

The creature under the distant bench made another pitiful cry.

Harry looked back to it. “You said this is a crossing, does that mean I can go back?”

“That is up to you, my dear boy,” Dumbledore confirmed.

“If I didn’t want to go back? What would happen then?” Harry asked.

“I think you could board one of these trains if you so desired,” Dumbledore said looking at the empty station.

“Where would it take me,” Harry asked. He could hear the sound of a distant train whistle.


“And if I go back, do you think I can defeat him,” Harry asked.

“I think so,” Dumbledore rose to his feet.

“One last question sir,” Harry said standing up too.

“Yes?”

“Is this real or is it all happening in my head?” Harry asked.
“Of course, it’s all happening in your head, Harry. What makes you think that doesn’t make it real?” Dumbledore said with a familiar twinkle in his eye.

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The dampness of the forest floor was seeping into his robes as he woke. Every part of his body hurt. The place where the Killing Curse hit him felt like it was on fire. Still, he didn’t move.

“Is he dead,” Voldemort asked.

The little light Harry could see from his face down position was blocked as someone came to kneel beside him. He felt a hand slide under his shirt, nails scratching across his chest.

“Is my son alive? Is Draco at the castle,” Narcissa Malfoy whispered into Harry’s ear.

Her long blonde hair kept Harry’s face from view as he whispered back, “Yes.”

“He’s dead, my Lord,” Narcissa said to the waiting Death Eaters.

Harry stayed limp as Hagrid picked him up with tremendous care. Branches cut at his face and pulled at his hair as they walked slowly through the tightly clustered trees as they made their way back to the castle. The man never noticed Harry breathing or that his heart still beat. He was too heartbroken at the loss of the child he had once rescued from the ruins of his destroyed home. Harry listened as Voldemort blathered on, antagonizing the “defeated” school. The dark wizard made promises to forgive those who agreed to join his side. That he was all they would need to believe in.

As the wizard kept talking, Harry’s mind drifted to his own existence. He was still here. He was once again saved by a mother’s love. Narcissa Malfoy loved her son, just as much as Lily had loved him. She would lay down her life for Draco if, given the chance, Harry was certain.

Voldemort would never understand that. His mother had died only hours after he was born. She never was able to show her son what it meant to be loved. Even if she had, would Voldemort have understood it, or appreciated it?

Love had its own price, Harry realized. So many people had lost their lives in this war. So many had died in their love for Harry. Remus, Fred, Snape just to name a few.

Tears were fighting to come to his eyes at the thought of the Potions Master. Harry had cost the man his life. It was Harry’s failure at Occlumency that led to the spy being discovered. Harry turned his head slightly as he heard Neville’s clear voice. The boy stood defiantly before Voldemort.

“We may have lost Harry tonight,” Neville said. “People die every day. What he stood for didn’t die with him. What Harry and Dumbledore understood was that love will always win. That’s why Dumbledore will always be a greater wizard than you.”
Harry wished he could applaud his friend. The trill of phoenix song made Harry open his eyes enough to see what was happening. Fawkes dropped the Sorting Hat at Neville’s feet. Where had the bird been when Professor Snape could have used him?

Nagini free of her enchanted cage lunged forward, snatching at the gleaming red and gold bird as he vanished in an instant. Neville pulled the ruby encrusted hilt of the Sorting Hat. Harry watched as Sword of Gryffindor appeared out of the depth of the material once more. Neville turned it and brought it down, severing the head of the snake in one blow.

There was a cheer from those behind Neville. Voldemort made a noise that was unmistakably one of pain. The last of the ties holding Voldemort to Earth was gone. He was just as vulnerable as the rest of them. Harry could defeat the dark wizard once and for all. Maybe he would be here for Teddy after all.

Harry jumped from Hagrid’s arms, darting behind a stone pillar that surrounded the court yard.

“Harry,” Hagrid said confused, looking down at where the boy had just been.

Death Eaters fled at the sight of The-Boy-Who-Lived alive once more. Others stood by Voldemort, the fighting breaking out again. Harry cast a Shield Charm to prevent Voldemort from cursing Neville. Bellatrix made a mistake as she set her sights on Ginny Weasley. Mrs. Weasley came to her daughter’s defense. Harry let out a cheer as Mrs. Weasley’s exclamation of, “NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!”

The redhead woman battled the dark-haired Death Eater with a frightening degree of skill. The Death Eater laughed as if it was a well-played game. She raised her wand to cast another spell leaving her chest exposed. Mrs. Weasley took her opportunity and cast her spell. Bellatrix realized the mistake, the recognition clear on her face, but it was too late. She fell dead.

Voldemort screamed at the death of his most loyal follower.

Harry stepped forward, “It’s over Tom.”

Voldemort hissed at the sound of his given name.

Harry yelled at the crowd, “Nobody help. This has to be me, just me.”

“You don’t mean that,” Voldemort said with a note of disbelief.

“Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives,” Harry reminded Voldemort. “One of us will die here.”
“You Potter,” Voldemort said with an air of dangerous over-confidence.

“There are no more Horcruxes, Tom. It’s just us,” Harry said. He flexed his hand around the handle of Draco’s wand. “You won’t win.”

“I possess the Elder Wand,” Voldemort warned.

“But it doesn’t belong to you,” Harry remarked, as he stepped to the side. “I heard you tell Professor Snape yourself.”

“I killed the traitor Snape,” Voldemort said stepping to his own side. The wizards circled one another.

“You may have killed Professor Snape but it won’t make you the master of the Elder Wand,” Harry cautioned.

“Snape killed Dumbledore,” Voldemort said. Harry saw a flash of fear pass through the dark wizard’s red eyes.

“Professor Snape killed Dumbledore as an act of mercy. They both knew Dumbledore was dying, the victim of a curse on one of your Horcruxes. He wanted to die having never been defeated. That way the power of the Elder Wand would have been broken. But things didn’t go according to plan.” Harry twisted the hawthorn wand in his fingers. “It wasn’t Snape that took the wand from him. Somebody Disarmed him before he died. It was Draco Malfoy.”

The red eyes searched for the blonde head in the crowd.

“If you’re looking for him, you’re too late. I took his wand from him earlier this evening,” Harry said lifting the wand as if to prove his point. “Draco never knew he was the master of the Elder Wand. Now, I’ll bet it isn’t. The wand chooses the wizard. It the wand holds loyal to who Disarmed its last master, I’m the true master of the Elder Wand.”

Voldemort raised the Elder Wand and yelled in his high clear voice, “Avada Kedavra!”

At the same time using the wand taken from Draco, Harry yelled, “Expelliarmus!”

The spells collided in midair, green striking red. Harry held his breath as the wand flew out of the Voldemort’s hand and went in a wide arch coming toward Harry. The green light reflected back on the evil wizard and struck him down. The body seemed to fall in slow motion. The room was filled with a deafening cheer as Voldemort’s lifeless body finally hit the ground and remained motionless. It was clear, the reign of terror was over.
Some of the Death Eaters Apparated away too afraid to remain, many more collapsed in defeat where they stood. Aurors in scarlet red robes made their way through the crowd taking the beaten wizards into custody. The red clad wizards were soon joined by those wearing the acid green of St. Mungo’s as they began triaging the injured.

The Great Hall was alive with activity as students helped the professionals in their tasks as best they could. For the others, the house elves had set up a few long tables and were serving breakfast to anyone who wanted it. Harry saw Luna’s golden head bent together with Ginny’s fiery hair as the girls held each other. Neville had his arms around both girls.

Harry knew most of his people, his family, were not without their scars, but those who lived were now safe. Still, he couldn’t stand and face the survivors. He couldn’t stand to be in the room any longer. He needed some space, a place away from the buzz of activity. He looked down at the wand still in his hand. A thought occurred to him and he walked out of the room. He ignored the calls of his name as he walked up the stairs. The gargoyle that protected the headmaster’s office was lying on its side.

“Can I go in,” Harry asked the stone creature.

“Why not,” it grumbled back from its place on the floor.

The headmaster’s office was filled with applause as the boy walked in, Harry stepped back startled by the noise, nearly lost his balance on the now stationary stairs.

“Be careful my boy,” Dumbledore’s portrait warned gently.

Harry regained his balance as he gave the old man’s painting a soft smile but said nothing.

“Is it done, darling boy?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded, “He’s really gone this time.” Harry paused for a moment, “I should tell you that I lost the stone in the woods when I went out to meet Tom.”

“Does anyone else know where it is?” Dumbledore asked.

“I don’t think so,” Harry answered. Harry held up the Elder Wand to the headmaster’s portrait. “You know I don’t really like this wand all that much. It’s far more trouble than it’s worth. I plan to return it to its rightful resting place. If I die a natural death its power will be broken.”

Dumbledore’s ancient face nodded its approval.

“I’m going to keep the cloak,” Harry informed the portrait.

“It is yours until you wish to pass it on,” Dumbledore agreed.

Harry looked at the wand in his hand. If this would not work, then nothing would. He had to at least try. He placed the two halves of his broken wand on the desk and raised the Elder Wand. “Reparo,” he whispered. The two halves came together again as it were new. Harry picked it up and red sparks shot out the end as they had the first time he had ever held it. He smiled. It felt like being reunited
with an old friend.

Still not ready to face the masses in the Great Hall, Harry sank down exhausted, onto the sofa in the corner of the headmaster’s office, the same one he had slept on after Sirius’ capture. He rested his head on the arm not caring there was almost no padding. His eyes drifted closed as his glasses dug into the side of his face. The gargoyle must have been letting others up the stairs behind him as a short time later Harry felt someone pull his glasses gently off his face. The familiar smell of honeysuckle shampoo filled his nose as the Luna wiggled her way into Harry’s embrace. Harry half-asleep kissed the top of her head. Sometime later Harry thought he heard someone mutter something about “so like his father,” “not finding them in a broom cupboard,” and “taking house points”. Harry shifted as the person placed a blanket down over the slumbering teens. A smile crept onto the boy’s face as he fell asleep once more.

Chapter End Notes

One last chapter...
It was still warm for the first of September as the family of six made their way to the train station from the car park. King’s Cross buzzed with the activity of travelers coming and going about their business. The family ignored them as they walked with purpose toward their destination. They drew a few strange looks with the trolleys loaded down with old fashioned steamer trunks driven by the boys. One even had a large barn owl in a birdcage on top of this trunk.

“Who wants to go first,” the father asked they came to a stop in front of a pillar between Platforms Nine and Ten.

“I’ll go,” the older boy said stepping forward.

“Of course, you will,” the father said with a slight grin. “Go on, James.”

James screwed up his face in concentration looking at the pillar as he set off at a run. An instant later he was gone.

“You next?” The father asked as looked down at his younger son.

The boy shook his head. There was a nervousness present on his green eyes his brother had not had.

“I’ll go with you if you want,” the father suggested.

The boy nodded mutely. The man placed his larger hands next to the boy’s.

“On the count of three,” the man said as a warning.

“Three...Two...One...” and they were running to the pillar too. Everything was black as they crossed the barrier only to emerge on the other side, a gleaming red steam engine in front of them.

“Over here, Harry,” a familiar voice called.

“Looks like James already found your Aunt Hermione,” Harry said to the boy.

The boy nodded his dark head.

“Good morning Albus,” Hermione greeted pulling the boy in for a hug. “Are you excited to be starting Hogwarts?”

Albus let go of his aunt not answering the question.

“Your aunt asked you a question, Al. It’s polite to answer.” Harry scolded softly. Then he noticed what his son was doing. He eyes joined the boy searching the crowd for the desired individual.

“He’s not here yet,” Harry said softly to Albus. “Now, why don’t you answer Aunt Hermione’s question.”
Albus looked up the bushy haired witch.

“Are you excited to be starting Hogwarts,” Hermione repeated.

Albus bit his lip.

“He’s scared he’s going to be sorted into Slytherin,” James informed his aunt, cutting off the younger boy’s reply.

“Why would you worry about that?” Hermione asked gently.

“James keeps saying I will,” Albus mumbled.

“There’s nothing wrong with being in Slytherin,” Harry told him before his son.

“You weren’t,” Albus replied.

“Neither was your mum,” Harry said puzzled. “She was a Ravenclaw as you well know. Did James say something to you?”

Albus shrugged.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Harry chided. “You know we like you to use your words, Albus.”

“That’s what Papa always says,” Albus mumbled.

“Your Papa is a smart man. Why don’t you go see if you can find a compartment?” Harry said prodding the boy between the shoulder blades. “I’ll wait here for the others.”

“Since when he worried about being sorted into Slytherin?” Hermione asked softly.

“I reckon James must have said something to him,” Harry said looking down the platform. “Neville already at the school?”

“Yes,” Hermione said sadly. “I wish he could be here to see them all off but he had too much to prepare as Head of House.”

Harry nodded silently.

“Where are Luna and the girls?” Hermione asked.

“Hullo,” Luna greeted joining the adults as they stood with their children’s abandoned luggage carts.

“Aunt ‘Mione,” a redhead girl of about eight said from Luna’s right side.

“Good morning Lily,” Hermione said with a soft smile. “And you too Pandora,” she added to the girl’s twin standing on Luna’s left. “How are my favorite twins doing?”

“Oi,” objected George Weasley as he came to join the small gathering. “I thought we were your favorite twins. How could we possibly be replaced?”
“We couldn’t possibly be,” continued Fred standing beside him.

The girls ignored the banter of the adults clearly used to the teasing.

“Where’s Robbie,” requested Pandora.

“He went with his sister to look for a compartment,” Hermione informed them.

“Your Grandma Molly pulled him in the last time I knew,” George corrected.

Lily grabbed her sister’s hand tugging her the way their cousins must have gone.

Turning to Fred and George, Hermione asked, “Where are rest of you?”

Fred jerked his finger down the track, “Mum’s holding the lot of them down there.”

“How did you two escape?” Harry jokingly asked.

“It was easy, we said we were going to find you lot,” George answered. “She’ll murder you if you don’t come and say ‘hello’.”

“We will,” Hermione promised.

“Can you believe those two start in only three years,” Harry said as he watched his girls mix in with the older children talking with their families and friends. Luna gave his hand a comforting squeeze.

“They’ll be the last ones to go,” George observed.

“Maybe,” Fred agreed. “Gin might still convince Krum to let Ognyan go to Hogwarts.”

“I didn’t think Krum liked Drumstange that much,” Harry said looking back to his friends.

“Ah well, you know there’s still that school pride to contest with,” George explained. “Bill and Fleur almost sent Victoire to Beauxbaton for that very reason.”

“And I am sure they’re regretting their choice greatly at the moment, the way I just saw my son kissing her,” Remus said slipping easily into the conversation.

“Don’t say that about our Teddy,” Tonks said jabbing her husband none too gently in the ribs.

“I am saying nothing bad about Teddy. I was merely stating had they, Bill and Fleur might not have had their eldest daughter caught performing such public displays of affection.” Remus said rubbing his injured ribs. His hair now was all steel grey that made him look much older than his fifty-six years of age. His face had deep laugh lines that had come from his life with Tonks after the war.

“When’s Papa getting here,” Hermione’s daughter asked returning to her mother’s side.

“He’ll be here,” Hermione promised. “Your Papa always keeps his promises, you know that, Elizabeth.”

As if to prove a point the matching excited squeals of “Papa!” from Lily and Pandora announced the much-anticipated arrival. The girls took off running ambushing the unprepared victim. Elizabeth
watched the pair go, stoically standing beside her mother nonetheless.

“Papa,” Lily said motioning for the tall man to pick her up.

“You are getting much too big for this Little Flower,” the man said giving into the girl’s request regardless. He held her tight for a moment and placed a kiss on the girl’s forehead before setting her down on the ground once more to repeat the process with her sister. “You too are rather big for this, Nightingale.”

The girls took their grandfather’s hands as they walked back to join their family once more.

“Are we too old to greet our grandfather,” the older man teased Elizabeth.

“I…” Elizabeth began.

“Libby, silly child, you are never too old for your grandfather’s affection,” the man opened his arms to the girl with a smile.

The girl launched herself into his waiting arms.

“For the hundredth time, Severus, her name is Elizabeth,” Hermione sighed.

“Not to Papa,” Elizabeth said her face half-buried in the dark fabric of the wizard’s waistcoat.

“Indeed,” Severus agreed as he ran a hand over the girl’s bushy brown hair, identical to her mother’s. Changing the subject, Severus announced, “Lupin, your son is a menace.”

“Is that really fair, Severus,” Remus complained the werewolf.

“If the boy had bothered to properly seal and store all the ingredients he had helped himself to I would have been here half an hour ago,” Severus said clearly annoyed.

“Ah well, he did want to see Victoire off for her last year of school,” Remus said with a sigh.

Severus rolled his eyes, “He is not the only one who wishes to see someone off. How he managed to become a proficient brewer with his parents is still a wonder to me.”

“He must get it from his mother,” Remus said with a smile.

“A drunken Hippogriff is less likely to make a mistake in the lab than you wife, Lupin,” Severus said smoothly.

“You know sometimes I wonder if Hermione used those phoenix tears on the right person, Severus,” said the pink-haired Auror in annoyance.

“I really must thank you once more, Granger, for saving my life. I was fortunate you remembered you had such a valuable resource tucked away in that ridiculous bag of yours. If only had been able to act and save a few more lives.”

“I still have a few drops left,” Hermione reminded him.

“Still are you sure you made the best choice?” Tonks asked she jerked her thumb as Severus. “You
could have saved a nicer bloke, you know, one who doesn’t hang little boys up by the ankle.”

“And if it were not for me, who would tame Lupin’s wolf every month,” Severus questioned with a smirk.

“Enough,” Lupin said cutting off Tonks’ response. Werewolf rights were much better today, but Remus still did not like people drawing attention to his condition.

“If it were not for me, who would tame Lupin’s wolf every month,” Severus questioned with a smirk.

“Enough,” Lupin said cutting off Tonks’ response. Werewolf rights were much better today, but Remus still did not like people drawing attention to his condition.

“Where is Albus, Potter?” Severus demanded in concession.

“He’s scared you don’t want to see him off,” Elizabeth said looking up from her place still at Severus’ waist.

“Why would he think something as dunderheaded as that,” Severus demanded looking down at the girl.

“He thinks you’ll be mad he if doesn’t get sorted into Slytherin,” the girl explained.

Severus raised an eyebrow at the explanation.

“James Arthur, what did you tell your brother,” Harry demanded. For the sake of all present and future teachers of Hogwarts, Severus had refused to let the boy be named with Potter’s original choice, “James Sirius”. There was no way he would inflict that much Marauder on the castle at one time. Even so, the boy took after his biological grandfather in more ways than Severus cared to admit, his penchant for mischief one of the greatest.

“Nothing,” James said holding up his hands.

Severus looked down at the boy. James swallowed heavily.

“He said that I was going to be a Slytherin. That there wasn’t a wizard that went bad that wasn’t in Slytherin,” Albus said coming up with Teddy.

“Utter rubbish, I can attest to you, Albus, that not all Slytherins are bad,” Severus said looking to the young man. “Theodore, I would like to have a word with you about your responsibilities in the lab.”

The young man’s bright teal hair lightened several shades, “Yes Pa-,” at seeing the older wizard’s raised eyebrow he corrected to, “Yes sir.”

Harry sank down so he could meet the emerald eyes of his son. Of his four children, Albus was the only one who took after Harry. “You know, if it really matters to you, you can ask the Sorting Hat to put you in Slytherin.”

“Really,” Albus asked in disbelief.

“I did,” Harry confirmed.

“But you were a Gryffindor,” Albus objected.

Harry scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Well, I asked the hat to not put me in Slytherin.”
“But Papa was head of house,” Albus recalled.

“I know but there were other people, some of the first wizards that I met who wanted to be Slytherins weren’t very nice. I didn’t want to spend seven years sharing my house with bullies.” Harry said shifting to his other knee.

“Potter,” Severus warned.

“So Slytherins are bullies,” Albus asked his grandfather.

Severus joined Harry at the boy’s eye level, “No house can say they are free from bullies. Some of the greatest bullies I had the misfortune to come in contact were Gryffindors.”

Albus frowned, unsure what to think.

“There is nothing you can do, Albus Sirius Potter, that would cause anyone of your family members standing here to stop loving you. We will be there for you regardless of house, Muggleborn, Pureblood, or squib.” Severus said with a strong squeeze of the boy’s shoulder.

“You promise,” Albus demanded.

“As I promised your grandmother a lifetime ago, always,” Severus ensured.

Albus threw his arms around the man’s neck, “Thanks, Papa.”

“You are most welcome. However, you should realize this is the same point your father was just trying explain, no matter how inarticulately.” The man said as he returned the boy’s embrace.

The whistle blew alerting all assembled the train would be departing soon. The last of the trunks were loaded onto the train. Lunches from Grandma Molly were passed out even if they would be ignored or forgotten on the long ride northward.

“What promise did you mean Severus,” Harry asked as the wheels shifted to life and the train began to slowly move.

“What are you on about, Potter,” Severus said as he stood motionlessly among an ocean of waving hand and arms both on the platform and the train.

“The promise to love us no matter what,” Harry elaborated, “when did you make it? Was it after that thing by the lake?”

Severus was silent as the last of the carriages disappeared from view of the station. “That is none of your concern.” He finally managed. “What is important is that I plan to keep my word to her until I breathe no more.”

“Papa,” Lily asked as she slipped her hand into his large calloused one once again. “Why won’t you tell Daddy?”

Severus looked down at the girl that held fiercely onto his hand, an almost miniature copy of her namesake. “Because, Little Flower, it came too late. If I had been able to do what your grandmother requested in her letter to me sooner, so much grief could have been avoided, lives saved, the world different. If it were not for her letter, her promise to forgive me, I would have been a very different
“I like who you are,” Lily said with a smile, missing three or four teeth as her adult ones grew in.

“And I you,” Severus said picking the girl up once again to place a kiss on her cheek. “Shall we see if we can convince your father and the rest to join us for an ice cream?”

“Yes,” Lily said enthusiastically still in the wizard’s firm grip.

This may not have been what Lily Potter had in mind when she wrote her letter to Severus shortly before her death but Harry was certain she would have been happy with the results. The lost boy from Spinner’s End no longer lost. He found a family in Lily’s son, the unwanted and neglected addition to Number Four Privet Drive and his assorted friends.

Chapter End Notes

We've reached the end September first, 2017. Did you like it? Thanks so much for reading.

I would like to take a moment to thank my friends Pan was the person who was the first person to read any of my stories and encouraged me to post them. My beta Echo_Waves who was the first person who read the 700 of what was to become the prologue and dealt with my almost obsessive discussion of the story. Without these two, "Seasons of Love" would never have come to be.

End Notes

Title borrowed from "Rent".

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