A Time for Realizations and Change

by scarlettjabner

Summary

What if Sirius actually rescued Harry from the Dursleys' at the end of his third year? What if Harry decided he'd had enough of taking everything laying down? What if Harry and a certain red-head had more in common than he realized? What if she understood him better than anyone else ever could?
Chapter 1

Harry was sitting on a swing in the park near his aunt and uncle’s home and thinking about the past year.

His thoughts were particularly plagued by one Sirius Orion Black, first escaped convict from Azkaban. Declared guilty of fourteen counts of murder, rumoured to be Voldemort’s most loyal servant.

The man that had broken into Hogwarts to get to a rat.

The same man who had then proven his innocence, only to have the moment stolen away from him, leaving Harry with the echo of a desperate promise whispered in the safety of the night.

His godfather.

Harry leaned forward and rubbed his hands over his face then abruptly stood and looked up at the sky. His baggy clothes weighed down on him and made the heat even more unbearable than it would normally be. He brushed the hair out of his forehead and started to head out of the park. A shadow fell over him just as he reached the gate, but Harry thought nothing of it, not until said shadow began to move, became bigger and bigger until Harry could clearly make out the silhouette of two wings flapping on the asphalt.

He spun around on the spot and stumbled back when the sight before him threatened to knock him off his feet.

A familiar hippogriff was tumbling out of the sky towards him, talons held in close to its body and wings spanning the height of two grown men as the majestic animal dove to the ground. Buckbeak didn’t give Harry any time to scramble out of his way. When he was mere inches from the ground, the hippogriff tucked its wings close to its body and landed on four hooved feet, grunting and snapping its beak as it clawed the floor.

It occurred to Harry then, as he watched the outline of a person jumping off Buckbeak’s back, that standing petrified in the middle of the street as a wizard advanced on him was not the best way to deal with a possible oncoming danger. It did not help his state of mind at all that he could’ve sworn he recognized the man sauntering up to him.

“I’ll admit, I expected more of a response out of you than shocked speechlessness,” said the man, speaking with a familiar voice, “but I suppose a standing ovation will have to do.”

Sirius’ arms were around him before he could process the man moving. He ruffled Harry’s hair as though it was something he’d always done and then moved to hold him at arm’s length, scrutinizing the boy from head to toe.

“Come on, pup, don’t leave me hanging.”

Harry swallowed. “I—you’re not supposed to be here,” stammered Harry. “They’ll come looking for you, they know you want to find me—I don’t—”

“I came here because I promised you I would, remember?” Sirius interrupted him. “I’m just sorry it took this long before we could make it—”

“We?”
It was then that Harry heard the distinct sound of retching coming from behind Buckbeak. The hippogriff stepped aside to reveal Professor Lupin, of all people, leaning over some flower bushes on his hands and knees. The man stumbled to his feet and leaned heavily against Buckbeak’s side.

“Hullo, Harry. I’d say it’s nice to see you again, but I sincerely wish it could be under better circumstances,” he attempted a smile which pulled on the half-healed scar on his cheek and had him wincing in regret.

“I don’t understand. Professor Lupin—”

“Just Remus, now. Moony if you’d like."

“—what are you doing here?”

“I’m getting you outta here, Harry. You never should’ve landed in that house in the first place and I couldn’t live with myself knowing you’re living with that… genetic abnormality and her tub of lard.”

“I have a cousin.”

“A tub and a half, then,” Sirius grinned. “We would’ve come sooner, but we had a few hiccups.”

“Nothing for you to worry about,” added Remus when he saw the question written on Harry’s face.

“It’s not the homeliest place on earth, but we have a house where we can stay and there’s not a chance anyone can find me there…” Sirius’ sentence trailed off uncertainly the longer Harry remained unresponsive. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to come though, not many people would choose living on the run over suburbia, and you said you didn’t like it here, but—”

“I can really live with you?” Harry held his breath.

“Yeah, but it’s completely up to you if you don’t want to—”

“When do we leave?” He could feel the life bleeding back into his body and took the first deep breath since Sirius had brought up leaving Privet Drive forever. “I don’t need to think about it, anything is better than staying here, trust me.”

Sirius looked like he had more to say, but bit his tongue at the last second.

“Midnight is when we leave on Buckbeak, here.” Sirius patted the animal on the side of his neck. “Be ready by then, have all your things packed tight and come meet us out here, at this park. We’ll pretty much be hiding around until then, biding our time ‘til it’s safe to come out.”

“There’s a specific time for that?” Harry caught the pointed look shared between the two grown wizards and knew he was missing something. “You’re not telling me something.”

“Not yet,” his godfather didn’t bother denying it.

“You should head back now, Harry, and start packing. It would be best if you didn’t alert your aunt and uncle about anything being different today, just act normal,” said Remus.

“Then they’ll know something’s different,” Harry muttered to himself. “Midnight?”

“Midnight,” said Sirius. He leaned in for another hug, which Harry returned this time, then walked over to Buckbeak and heaved himself onto his back.

Remus sent Harry a shaky mock-salute, staring at the hippogriff with clear trepidation before sucking
in a lungful of air and pulling himself up behind Sirius, grappling at the other man’s clothing like they were the only thing keeping him upright.

Harry winced in sympathy and watched as Buckbeak swivelled on his heel and galloped a few metres down the road before thrusting himself in the air in a flurry of feathers. When he was nothing more than a speck in the sky no bigger than his thumb, Harry turned down the road and trudged over to the Dursleys’.

Quietly pushing the front door open, Harry snuck into the house and tip-toed his way up the stairs, making sure to avoid all the loose floorboards bound to give him away. Once inside his room, he closed the door behind himself and leaned his back against it, head making a soft thud against the wood. He closed his eyes for a moment and just enjoyed the strange silence that filled the house. Strange, because he couldn’t hear his uncle yelling at the TV downstairs and complaining about the jews raising the taxes again, or his aunt scrubbing and vacuuming her way through every dirt particle that had the gall to show up in her home.

Opening his eyes, Harry surveyed the room that he had been living in for the past three years. It was small, he couldn't deny that, and it had never really felt like his room. If he took away his trunk and Hedwig then it would look like a normal guest-room—a guest-room with an air thin mattress and paint chipping from the walls—but a guest-room nonetheless.

Is this all he had to show for the thirteen years he'd lived in this house? There weren't any pictures of him around the house—the Dursleys would rather pretend that he didn't exist than admit to themselves they were housing a freak—and he had barely had any interaction with the neighbours, so they probably wouldn't even notice if he suddenly left.

He’d be gone by the end of the day and there would be nothing left behind to prove he’d ever been here in the first place.

It was a startling realization.

Thankfully, before he could explore it any further Hedwig choose that moment to swoop into the room through the window and land gracefully on his desk.

“Hey girl, how was hunting? Did you get anything good?” he lightly scratched her behind her head and watched as she leaned into his touch and hooted softly. “Really? That good? Well I'm glad you got something nice to eat; it's probably better than what I get here.”

Hedwig let out another hoot, this one louder than the first one.

“You don't have to worry about me, we're getting out of here soon. Tonight, actually, so don’t go flying off any time soon, alright? Midnight’s the deadline.”

Hedwig turned her head and lightly nipped at his fingers before holding out her leg for him. Harry looked down and noticed the letters tied to her leg.

“Sorry. Here, let me get that off you.” He gently untied the letters and then led her over to her cage where he already had a bowl of water and some snacks waiting for her. Hedwig jumped onto his shoulder, nipped his ear in thanks before fluttering back down to eat and rest.

Harry sat down at his desk and opened up the first of four letters.

Dear Harry,

How are you? Have you enjoyed your holidays so far?
Mine have been great; mum and dad decided to take a trip to France and that's where I am right now. We've only been here for five days but we've seen so much and still have even more left to see! My dad got me a camera this summer and I'm taking as many picture as I can so I can show you later.

Do you think you did well in the exams? Do you think our test results will come soon? I am sure I must've mistranslated at least two runes and I know that I made a mistake in Arithmancy. Astronomy was alright but I think I drew Venus a little too far to the right and they might take away points for that. What about you?

I got a letter from Dumbledore a few days ago. He says he just wanted to check up on me after you-know-what happened. He said to get back to him if I heard from you-know-who and also asked about you. I think he might be concerned. Are you alright, Harry? I read in a book that losing a someone important to you so suddenly can be very hard on a person so I don't want you to keep everything bottled up. We are here to listen.

See you in September 1st,

Hermione

Harry shook his head half-exasperated and half-fond as he reached the end of Hermione’s letter. Leave it to her to be in France for the summer and still spend time worrying about exams she more than likely passed with flying colours. He appreciated her efforts at comforting him (that she’d spent time doing research for Harry instead of enjoying her holidays was typical Hermione and spoke to him more than anything else could have) but ultimately it was her mention of Dumbledore’s letter that caught his eye.

As far back as Harry could remember, the headmaster had never had any personal correspondence with neither Harry nor his friends. Even after everything the three of them had been put through in their first and second years, Dumbledore had never bothered to write to them before. He had that weird feeling again, like something nagging at the back of his head, a feeling that told him he was missing an important piece of the puzzle.

He pushed it aside and opened his next letter.

Hey Harry!

Guess what, mate? The Quidditch match between Ireland and Bulgaria is just a few weeks away! All of us want to go and dad promised that he'd get us all tickets. I can't wait to see them play! I know they won't be as good as the Chudley Cannons, but it'll still be awesome to be there and watch them play. Did you know that Bulgaria’s Seeker is still in school? Just think, that could be you in a couple of years if you play your cards right.

Anyway, I talked to mum about you coming over this summer, but she says it's up to your guardians to decide. Do you think they’ll let you come over in time for the World Cup?

Dumbledore stopped by and asked about you, by the way. It was weird, too. He’s never stopped by before (when the twins aren’t involved, anyway) and when I asked him about it, he said it probably wouldn’t be a good idea for you to leave Privet Drive with Scabbers running free.

Maybe you can come over after the Cup and stay at the Burrow for a couple of days? You still have to buy your stuff for school, right?

Let me know what the muggles say and I’ll talk to mum.
Ron

Harry placed Ron's letter on top of Hermione's, removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes and sighed.

Dumbledore again.

Why was he taking such a sudden interest in Harry's friends? That's twice now that Dumbledore had inquired about Harry to others and Harry didn’t know how he should feel about it. Annoyed, perhaps, that with Dumbledore himself saying that he shouldn’t leave the house, his chances of seeing any type of freedom this summer would’ve been reduced to zero if it weren’t for his godfather’s escape plan.

He grabbed the next letter. This one had his name on the front written in elaborate cursive which clued Harry in to whom it might be from.

Dear Harry,

I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I think it is only prudent to inform you that your prospects for this summer might have just become severely limited. As I am sure you understand, it would not be prudent to leave the safety of your home for the Burrow—a place we both know a certain someone is intimately familiar with.

Loathe as I am to admit to this: the disappearance of one cowardly rodent has had the consequence of adding a danger to the world which would only serve to backfire upon you were it to catch you unawares.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Turning over the piece of paper in his hands, Harry slowly came to realize that the headmaster hadn’t written anything else. No deeper explanation as to why Harry couldn’t even leave the house for a few hours to spend time with his friends in a public place like Diagon Alley, where Wormtail would be hard-pressed to make a single move against Harry (without calling on the attention of dozens of witches and wizards at least). He found no justification for why the Headmaster was leaving Harry to fend for himself for two months in the house of relatives who would give both their eyes to be rid of him once and for all.

Harry had the sudden thought that he would love to see the look on the headmaster's face when he realized that Harry, who had not been allowed to leave the premises, was no longer living at Privet Drive.

After unceremoniously throwing Professor Dumbledore's letter in his trunk, he picked up the last one and turned it over in his hands. Who else would be writing to him? He didn't recognize the handwriting and when he brought it to his nose instead of smelling rock-cakes like he had expected, he detected a faint flowery smell clinging to the paper. Turning it over again, he opened it up and started to read.

Dear Harry,

I know we don't really know each other but I'd like to fix that. I know Ron has probably been telling you all sorts of horror stories about me (and my behaviour around you probably hasn’t helped much) but I swear I’m not nearly as barmy as he makes me out to be.

You’re Ron’s best friend and that means you’re going to be around for a while, so I’d like it if we
could at least say hi to each other without me putting my elbow in the butter dish again or running away to lock myself in my room because you caught me off guard.

Anyway, answer whenever you want (preferably in a few days, though) and if you don't want to be friends then I'll accept it, but I feel I must inform you that I am a wonderful person so it would be your loss...

If you do decide that you could use another friend, then let me tell you a little bit about myself:

My full name is Ginevra Molly Weasley but never call me that—it’s Ginny. My favourite colour is red and the Holyhead Harpies wipe the floor with Ron’s precious Canons. Nearly all of my brothers treat me like I am still five years old, but don't worry, I learned how to deal with them a long time ago (ever heard of the Bat-Bogey Hex?). Fred and George are the only ones that don't treat like a toddler and I love them for it. They sometimes let me help with their pranks and those are the absolute best. No one ever suspects little ol' me.

I love flying, but don’t tell my brothers I told you that because they don’t know I can even mount a broom. Serves them right for always forgetting to lock the door to the broomshed, if you ask me.

In any case, Ron’s been championing against Mum and Dad to bring you here for the summer. They didn’t need much convincing (they were already planning on having you over for the last three weeks) but it could still be a couple of weeks before they send a letter. They seem to think your relatives would like to spend some quality time with you before we take you away again. I didn’t personally see Ron’s jaw hit the floor but I was told it was a close one.

See you soon—

Ginny

Harry's lips tugged to form a smile as he read Ginny's letter. It was true that they hardly knew each other, but he wasn't about to judge her on what her older brothers had to say, or that one time he'd literally popped out of nowhere at her house while she was still in pyjamas. He already knew that he was going to write to her, but he didn't know what to say.

An apology would be a good way to start, he thought, since he practically ignored her after the whole fiasco with the Chamber of Secrets. As he thought back on it now, Harry was ashamed to remember that he hadn't even bothered to visit her at the infirmary. He remembered Ron going to visit her during mealtimes and coming back with updates on her recovery but couldn't think of a single reason why he hadn't even put in the effort to go see her himself after all they'd been through together at the hands of Tom Riddle.

With his mind made up, Harry pushed himself away from his desk and leaned down to grab a bottle of ink and a quill out of his trunk. He placed everything on his desk then took a piece of parchment from one of the drawers, unscrewed the top from the ink bottle, dipped his quill inside and began to write.

-D-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0

"Dinner!"

Petunia Dursley's shrill cry woke Harry up with a start. He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hands, nearly knocking off his glasses in the process, and then chanced a look around. He was still in his room and the letter he had written to Ginny was lying on the floor; probably from having been knocked down while he was sleeping. He grabbed the letter and smoothed the creases on the
parchment, folding it in half and leaving the letter lying next to Hedwig’s cage where said owl was on the verge of waking up.

“It’s okay girl, go back to sleep, you can deliver this tomorrow.”

Hedwig emitted a lowly hoot and lowered her head to rest under her wing, shuffling a bit more on her perch before settling in and falling asleep again.

“Boy! What is taking you so long? Get down here right now!”

Vernon Dursley’s booming voice startled Hedwig out of her light doze. She flapped her wings in alarm and snapped her beak in warning, head swivelling back and forth as she attempted to assess the new threat.

“Shh, it’s just Uncle Vernon, you know how he gets. Go back to sleep and by the time you wake up again, you won’t ever have to hear him again.” Harry reached a hand through the open cage to run it soothingly down Hedwig’s back, smoothing her feathers.

Once Hedwig had settled down, Harry thundered down the stairs to the kitchen and was greeted with the sight of Dudley and Uncle Vernon sitting at the table stuffing their faces full of roast beef and potatoes while his Aunt Petunia primly picked at her food, taking a few miniature sized bites more befitting a bird than a human.

Harry sat down on his chair and felt a hysterical laugh bubbling up in his chest when he spotted his own meal. His one slice of meat was paper thin (if he held it up to the light, he was certain he’d be able to see through it to the light bulbs hanging from the ceiling) and the potato lying next to it had a yellowish, filmy tinge to it that Harry knew from experience meant it had been undercooked.

He swallowed down his food and waited. Time seemed to crawl by as he watched his uncle and cousin decimate their portions and grab second, third and fourth helpings.

When there was nothing left on the table but dirty plates and meagre crumbs, Dudley pushed off his chair and waddled into the living room where the blue glow of the television was calling to him like the most beguiling of sirens. Harry was half off his chair when Uncle Vernon’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Boy, where do you think you’re going?”

“My room.” Although his own voice came out calm and collected, Harry could feel the first flicker of anger licking up the inside of his chest cavity.

“You’re not going anywhere ‘til you've washed the dishes and cleaned the whole damn kitchen,” said Uncle Vernon, all red cheeks and bulging eyes. “Come to think of it, my car needs a good cleaning too. It’s still dirty from when we had to drive you back here from the station and I don’t want any of your freakness left in my car.”

“Why me? Why don't you pry Dudley off the couch and make him do it? I've got better stuff to do.”

Harry had no idea what had come over him. He'd never had the courage to talk back to his uncle before, not like this. It felt exhilarating.

“What did you just say to me, boy?” Vernon's face deepened from fire-engine red to a scarlet hue.

“I'm not going to do it. Make Dudley do it, it'll be a nice change from all that sitting he’s majoring in.” That spark in his chest had turned to a steady warmth, like hot coals were settling on the bottom
of his stomach.

“You do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it.”

“No.”

Harry watched his uncle’s mouth open and close as he tried to search for words he couldn't find and the longer he took, the redder his face became until Harry half expected to see steam pouring out of his nose and ears like a train engine getting ready to start.

Uncle Vernon straightened out to his full height and marched up to Harry, putting his face inches away from his nephew’s. Harry had to force himself not to take a step back. He looked his uncle straight in the eyes and was surprised to find out that he no longer had to look up to him, they were the same height now. Vernon seemed to have noticed as well, but other than the split flash of something that crossed his eyes, he didn't let it deter him.

“It is because of our generosity that you even have clothes on your back,” Uncle Vernon began, carefully enunciating each word that passed his greasy lips. “We have taken care of you and fed you with the food from our very own table while you spread your… your unnaturalness… your witchcraft,” he whispered the word as though fearful it's very mention would have God strike him down, “in our very own home. You owe us everything that you are. You will show me some respect.”

“You can't tell me what to do, not anymore. And I don't owe you anything, I never have.” Turning his back on his uncle, Harry headed out the kitchen. He felt a prickle in the nape of his neck, like the feeling you get when you know someone’s staring at you, and ducked down just in time to avoid being hit in the back of the head by a china plate. It flew over him and shattered against the wall. With his back tight with tension and his fists clenched, Harry turned around and eyed his uncle.

“You threw a plate at me.” The last thing Harry should’ve been was surprised, but there it was, after all these years.

“You’re damn right I did. We have taken you in out of the goodness of our hearts, treated you like a part of this family and this is how you repay us. You think I’m just gonna stand by and watch—”

“The goodness of your hearts? Family?” Harry interrupted. A feeling he’d had only once before came over him again accompanied by the memory of Aunt Marge, blown up to a balloon of immense proportions, bouncing off the ceiling before floating off onto the street. Magic, energy, electricity—he didn’t know what it was but it was pouring off him in droves and he imagined that if he tried hard enough he could probably reach inside himself and grab onto that feeling until that was all he was—an assortment of atoms moving faster and faster until they’re nothing but a blur of sound and colour.

“How could you possibly say that? You never bought anything for me, I got Dudley's old clothes, too big and too ripped to be more than rags. You insulted me and my parents at every turn and never, never did you show me any kindness or love! So tell me, what gives you the right to slave me around and use me like your own personal punching bag? You think I owe you something for all these years in this cookie-cutter hellhole? If anything, you owe me years of my life.” Harry’s hands were shaking with how mad he was. He clenched them into fists by his sides and tried to convince himself now wasn’t the time to wonder what it would feel like to finally give as good as he got.

“You insolent boy,” whispered Aunt Petunia, hands clutching one another at the base of her throat as though that was the only thing holding her together. “How dare you speak to Vernon that way? To us? You think it’s been fun taking care of someone like you? You’re just like my sister and if you
don’t watch it you’ll end up just like her because that’s what happens to people like you. You have your magic stick and you wave it around every chance you get like it somehow makes you better than us, well let me tell you something.” Aunt Petunia pushed in close down as though she were sharing a secret. “I should’ve dropped you off at the furthest orphanage as soon as I saw you lying on our doorstep.”

Aunt Petunia kept talking at him, but Harry had stopped listening, the rushing in his ears didn’t allow him to hear anything other than the thumping of his own blood as it flowed through his body to his racing heart.

Something pulled inside him, some inside begging to be known and calling out for something he couldn’t identify until his wand was in his hand and it sated that feeling inside him. His wand was hot in his hand, like it had pulled the heat from the room and stored it in the eleven inches of holly. The television white noise would’ve drowned out whatever Aunt Petunia threw at him if she had still been talking, but she’d been left staring out the window alongside her husband, both of them stealing glances between each other and then at Harry.

Harry chanced a look outside and saw what had caught their attention: flowers were being ripped out from the ground by invisible hands and the trees bordering the Dursley backyard were engaged in a dance they didn’t know the steps to. He looked up to grey clouds and forking lightning striking the ground with a shriek. The garden chairs from the neighbour's house were being blown about and some were even lifted off the ground by the wind surging across Privet Drive.

Harry felt that same pull inside him again, the one that called for his wand and was now calling on something else entirely. Something larger and stronger that took over him until he couldn’t tell where the storm ended and he began.

“Stop it,” Aunt Petunia's command was warbled by fear, but it still carried to him over the howls of the storm. “You stop this right now. Don't think I don't know it's you. Enough, I said!”

“I don't think I could stop it now, even if I wanted to,” said Harry. The noise in his ears had quieted down to a dull throb and though he didn't doubt for a second that it was because of him that there was a tropical storm outside destroying the neighbourhood he’d grown up in, he felt equal parts removed and absorbed. He imagined this was what it must feel like to be possessed. He could see everything going on around him, hear the thoughts that went along with his actions and relate those to his body's movements, but it was as if he had no control over it. He was a spectator in his own mind and the wheel was there, right there in front of him begging him to grab hold and be the captain to his own ship but he couldn’t.

“I can't stop this.” He didn't know if he was talking to himself or to his aunt and that didn't take any of the truth out of his words. “I don't want to.” Years of fear, resentment, anger and humiliation were being let out in a matter of minutes and it felt so good to finally let go.

“Why you little—” His uncle pushed past his wife and marched up to Harry. His fist was raised shoulder height and he punched forward, hard and brutal, aiming for the skin of his nephew’s cheek. He was stopped millimetres before it could come into contact with anything and just like that, he was suspended mid-movement, as though someone had clicked pause on their remote.

Heart stuck in his throat, Harry stumbled back a step from his uncle’s prone form and wished for him to get away, far enough that he wouldn’t be able to reach Harry.

Uncle Vernon was hurled across the room and plastered to the wall like a fat starfish. He didn’t fall to the ground like he should have after making impact, instead he remained glued to the flowered wallpaper, eyes squinting against the pounding in his head as his nephew approached him with
careful steps.

“You didn’t have to love me, you know,” he said. “It wouldn’t’ve killed you to just treat me like a human being instead of the monster hiding under the bed. I don’t want to hate you, but I think it’s better than trying to love you just because you’re the only family I have left.”

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth to say something, but a thought from Harry stuck his tongue to the roof of his mouth and all that came out were grunts and moans. Harry was shaking as he watched his uncle struggling to get a word out. He felt sick to his stomach, a sickness of guilt and fear and power that he didn’t know how to handle.

A snake-like sensation was uncoiling in his chest and it begged Harry to let it out, to give these people what they deserved after everything they’d done to him. It spoke to his deepest and most hidden memories and begged for vengeance.

“You wish I’d never been left here? Me too. But I can’t change that, so I’m just gonna make both our lives easier and leave right now. You won’t see me again and if you do, take something from all these years of practice and pretend I don’t exist.”

Harry turned to walk out the door but found his aunt standing in the way.

“You can’t leave,” she said. Harry had to strain to hear her over the sound of the howling wind outside. “If you do, that headmaster of yours will—”

“It’s not my problem anymore.”

“Listen to me, we—”

“Aunt Petunia, just stop, alright? Stop it. I don’t care whatever deal you made with Dumbledore, what he promised you in exchange for keeping me here, that’s your problem.” He looked into her eyes, really looked at them, for the first time since he was five, when he learned that he’d find nothing there but hate and revulsion, and saw something he couldn’t identify. “I’m finally giving you what you want, what we both want. Let me go.”

She shook her head and stood her ground. Tears were dripping down her face and gathering at the collar of her shirt.

“You can’t,” she said. “If—if she could. This isn’t what she—”

“You’re talking about my mother?” asked Harry incredulously. “Now you think about her? Not when you locked me in a cupboard for days, or when your husband broke my arm because I pushed Dudley off the swing, or the hundreds of other times when you should’ve said something? You can’t even bring yourself to say her name, can you? Is that what you’re so afraid of? You think if I stay here because it protects me from Voldemort that you’ll somehow be forgiven for everything else you didn’t protect me from?

“Let me tell you something, Aunt Petunia: there is no doubt in my mind that if my mum was half the woman everyone says she was, she would want me to get as far away from you as I could.”

All the colour had drained from Petunia’s face and she trembled like a leaf in the wind as her nephew moved her out of the way and walked off without a glance back.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

I have to leave, he thought.
He couldn't wait for midnight, he had to leave right now before he did something that he would regret later. He could still sense his magic moving out of control inside his body and, though it had calmed down a bit after the episode in the kitchen, he was afraid that any moment now that snake poised in his chest would break free and cause irreparable damage.

His trunk was dragged out from underneath the bed and anything he could get his hands on was dropped inside. His hiding spot under the floorboards was emptied out of all of his hidden treasures and Hedwig was woken up mid packing and had to be calmed down and coaxed to retreat back to her cage from atop the dresser.

Harry’s heart was beating a mile a minute in between his ears as he locked his trunk shut and propped it up against the wall. His mouth was dry and tasted bitter. He felt like he’d just run a marathon in under five minutes and his body was only catching up to that fact.

A branch hitting the glass on his window had him chancing a look outside and he didn’t know what he should feel like when he saw the aftermath of what he had caused. His mind flashed back to last year, when he’d come so close to being called into the ministry for underage magic and if it hadn’t been for Fudge’s guilt and fear, he probably would have.

His wand was unnaturally warm in his hand. Harry could almost picture it sending off an indecipherable signal to the ministry, the Trace having been activated the second the first lick of air whispered down the street. It hadn’t taken them this long to get a letter out to him last time.

He had no one to protect him now.

He clutched his wand in hand and wheeled his trunk to the top of the stairs. He eyed Hedwig in her cage and let the trunk drop, bouncing between the wall and the bannister before it skidded to a stop at the bottom of the staircase, having left a black stripe of grime on the wall. The ruckus would’ve definitely been heard all over the house, but no one came to stop Harry from opening the front door and dragging his belongings outside.

The Dursleys’ car was gone. Harry took a moment to wonder if Vernon had managed to get down from the wall or if Petunia had left her mute husband hanging in her kitchen like a prized buffalo while she took the car and disappeared with her precious Dudders.

A strange feeling overcame him as he stepped onto the sidewalk, it was like pushing through a membrane of cold water. It hit him first in the face and then passed through the rest of his body until he had fully stepped on the pavement and the feeling was gone, replaced by a warm, humid breeze. It hit him just then that he had nowhere to go until Sirius and Remus came for him and as much as Harry relished the thought of walking down Privet Drive holding a trunk full of magical school supplies, a cage with an owl and a wand, he’d rather find a private corner in the world and sleep off this day for the next decade or so.

A screech sounded from above and then Buckbeak was dropping to the ground in front of him where his godfather immediately jumped off his back and rushed to Harry’s side.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked. “Didn’t you see the storm that came in just now? You should head inside before it gets worse aga—”

“It’s all my fault. I can’t go back inside, Sirius, I think the Dursleys left and I said I would leave, too, but I guess I forgot about the time and now I have no place to go and I’m just… I think I’m gonna pass out.” Harry’s eyes slipped shut for a second and he felt himself careening to the side before a pair of arms reached out and steadied him again.
“What’re you going on about, pup? What’s your fault?”

Harry blinked through the clouds in his head and said, “The storm thing. Pretty sure it’s my fault, but I swear I didn’t mean it, it just came out and then Uncle Vernon tried to hit me again and I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I’m so sorry. I rrr—really didn’ m-mean it.”

Harry blinked some more and wondered if it was already late enough to be night time because there was a definite darkness creeping in around the edges of his vision and he had half a mind to ask one of the three Siriuses standing in front of him if they knew what time it was.

“He tried to hit you again?” Sirius’ nose flared as Harry’s words sunk into his head.

“Pads!” Remus had jumped off Buckbeak and was now standing in front of the hippogriff, hand running soothingly over his head as he eyed the darkening sky uneasily. “I don’t know how much longer we have before the next shift starts. We’ll run out of luck soon if we don’t hurry.”

“Right right,” muttered Sirius, “pass me your wand, Moony.”

Harry’s trunk and Hedwig’s cage were shrunk to the size of pencil sharpeners and placed in Sirius’ pocket. Harry watched as Sirius murmured something to Hedwig and then the owl took off, wings flapping in the air the higher she rose.

“Alright, pup, nice and easy does it.” An arm was placed around Harry’s shoulders whilst another held him around the waist. It took both Sirius and Remus working together (and some lucky intervention from Buckbeak) to get him atop the hippogriff’s back.

“Don’ think I forgot abou’ the shift thing,” slurred Harry, wagging finger almost hitting Remus in the eye. “You’re keepin’ somethin’ from me. Ah know it and s’not nice.”

“I promise to tell you everything once we get to the house and you don’t sound like you’re speaking Gobbledegook, how ‘bout that?”

“Two minutes,” said Remus. “We’re cutting it close already. Let’s go.”

They climbed onto Buckbeak, keeping Harry in between the two of them as the teen rested heavily on his godfather’s back and fluttered his eyelids.

Buckbeak rolled his shoulders and took off in a gallop down the street. As soon as he had enough momentum he opened his wings and beat them once, twice and lifted all four of them off the ground and into the sky.

Harry kept his eyes open long enough to see the dishevelled remains of the Dursleys’ ideal home become nothing but another tally to the number of equally ordinary houses lining the streets of Privet Drive.
Chapter 2

The clouds broke from their tight mesh of white cotton and let the sun shine through the dirty windows of Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Inside, the only three residents of the enormous mansion-like house found themselves waking up from a long, restful sleep.

One of them, Sirius Black, found himself lying face down on his old childhood bed looking towards a sleeping hippogriff resting on the bedroom floor. The other one, Remus Lupin, sat up and immediately started getting himself dressed and ready for the day. It was his turn to cook breakfast and he had an extra mouth to feed today.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, kept on sleeping. A little sunlight wasn’t nearly enough wake him up. But a persistent little owl pecking at every uncovered inch of skin just might. He tried swatting her away but she would just come back for more. Groaning, he sat up in bed and mumbled something unintelligible, inwardly cursing the day he was given such a stubborn bird.

He pushed the covers off and stumbled out of the bed, catching himself on the bedpost before he could fall to the cold floor. His eyes squinted and his hands grappled at air as he searched for his glasses and found them on the bedside table.

He was in a very big room, much larger than his cupboard under the stairs. Dudley’s bedroom would probably fit three times in here. The bed he'd been sleeping on was located on the left side from the door, against the wall and across from it was a dresser, two wardrobes and another door leading to what Harry presumed was the bathroom. Right opposite the door were two floor to ceiling windows. They looked like they hadn't been cleaned in decades and only let in a minimal amount of light. The curtains were held against the walls with a thick, decorative rope. Harry guessed that at some point in the past they might have been a rich, green colour but now they were covered in so much dust and grime that he couldn't be too sure.

His stomach giving an obscenely loud rumble brought Harry out of his musings. After taking care of his business, he carefully opened a door and stepped out of the bedroom. The corridor he found himself in was just as depressing and dark as his room. The bedroom he was in was the last in a long corridor so he took off in the only other direction.

He let his eyes take in his surroundings. The walls were painted black, with bits of the paint chipping off in many spots and the carpet continually let out little puffs of dust as his feet landed on it.

Paintings were hung up on the walls, each with the face of a man or a woman with unforgiving eyes, small noses and thin lips lined into a haughty smirk disguised as a frown. All of them were peering down at him in derision. They weren't moving or talking like he’d seen the paintings at Hogwarts do, but to him it seemed like they were still judging him with those cold, grey eyes.

Sirius had that same exact shade, only his had never seemed this sharp and calculating. The portraits went on for miles and miles and it was only through the clothes and hair that Harry could tell them apart sometimes. Centuries of inbreeding had made it so that there was hardly ever any big changes in appearance in a dozen generations of Blacks. Scorch marks on several Black ancestors brought Harry to a stop on several occasions and gave him the feeling that if he were to walk any further to present time, he just might find a burnt face surrounded by a halo of shaggy black hair wearing Gryffindor robes.

Harry stopped walking once he reached the staircase. The clanking of kitchen pans and the smell of toasted bread wafting up the stairs led him true.
He chose his footsteps carefully and allowed himself to be guided by the creaks and snaps of centuries’ old wood. He was halfway down a second set of stairs when he happened to glance up from his feet. The shrivelled up, decapitated head mounted on the wall above a bronze plaque was enough to make him lose his footing on the next step and hurtle down the remaining few.

“Shitshitshitshitshit,” he moaned. Harry clutched at his ribs where he’d received the worst from the fall and practiced breathing through his nose in shallow breaths. He heard footsteps coming his way and was sitting up against the wall by the time Remus and Sirius rounded the corner.

“What ha—” An ear-splitting, blood-curdling scream shattered through the air.

There was a velvet, moth-eaten curtain on one side of the hallway that seemed to be shaking and rattling, as though something was trying to force its way into their world. The curtains were thrown open by an invisible force and at first glance, Harry thought they’d been covering a window—a window through which he could see an ugly old woman with a black hat and dress screaming and screeching like it was the only thing she knew to do. But it wasn’t a window—it was a life-sized (disturbingly realistic) magical portrait and it was definitely the most horrendous painting Harry had ever seen.

The old woman's eyes glowed an ugly yellow as drool dripped down her chin from her mouth. Her hair was in disarray and her hands were held out in front of her, clawing at an imaginary wall with black, pointy nails.

“Filth! Vermin! Parasites! Disgusting monsters! Half-breeds and scum! How dare you step foot in the house of my forefathers! The most Ancient and Noble House of Black! You would dare defile —”

Her screeching awakened other portraits in the house and they too joined in on the abuse. Harry sacrificed the hand holding his ribcage together to cover his ears. He was helped up from the floor by Remus and watched as Sirius marched up to the woman’s painting and planted himself in front of her.

“Shut up shut up shut up! Enough is enough, old woman!” He snatched the curtains and began to pull on them whilst the memory of the woman looked on in disgust.

“You!” she roared. “The traitor. The one who brought shame to this family! Abomination of my own flesh and blood. Lover of half-breeds, monsters and—” The curtains closed in around her and cut her ramblings short. Sirius then took out his wand and walked down the hallway stunning every portrait that continued to howl.

Harry felt Remus press a hand on his back and let lead him the way to a dreary kitchen where he was quick to slump down on a chair. A cup of steaming tea was placed in front of him and Harry took it gladly. Remus took a set opposite him.

“So. What the hell was that?”

“A nightmare is what it was,” said Remus.

“That, Harry, was my dear old mother,” Sirius came into the room with a half-amused, half-angry look on his face.

“That was your mother? Your actual mother.” Harry had the sudden thought that he’d gladly take the Dursleys over the venomous harpy from Hell.

“Hard to believe, isn't it?” Sirius walked up to the stove and grabbed a plate full of food. He placed it
in front of Harry, along with a knife and fork, and grabbed his own cup of tea “It's a small miracle I grew up to be the handsome devil that you see today,” said Sirius, wiggling his eyebrows playfully.

Harry shook his head at him and began to eat. He could feel their gazes following every forkful going into his mouth though and it made him squirm in his seat.

“What is it? Do I have something on my face?”

“No,” Remus replied, “it's just good to see you awake and eating something. You had us worried for a while there, that storm must've taken a lot out of you.”

“What do you mean? How long have I been sleeping?”

“A little over two days. We were worried that you’d gone into a coma but we checked and it was only a deep sleep. It makes sense. You used up a lot of your magical energy by calling up that storm, never mind one that big; I've never seen anything like it before.”

“Well not never,” Remus corrected, immediately flushing when Harry peered at him curiously, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Out with it already. When was the last time you saw something like that and why won’t you tell me?”

They exchanged uneasy glances between one another and became fascinated with tracing imaginary shapes on the table.

“Harry,” began Sirius, “you have to understand that it means absolutely nothing what we are about to tell you. It’s just a coincidence and other than it coming from two clearly very powerful wizards, the intent...the meaning is completely different. Alright?”

Harry hesitantly nodded.

“The only other time we saw a wizard call up a storm like you did, was around fifteen years ago when the war was still going on. Voldemort was very powerful. He was at the prime of his power and no-one ever thought he could be defeated, it all seemed hopeless but we still kept on fighting. We couldn't give up and let him take control of our world, we just couldn't.” said Remus, becoming lost in the memories of that time.

“We didn't have many numbers still willing to fight a losing battle back then, most of them had already been killed by him, and new recruits were hard to come by but we all knew when it was our turn to fight because it was always the same signs,” Sirius swallowed then continued. “The sky would darken all of a sudden, black clouds would cover the moon or sun, it left everyone fighting blind. Then a green light, like the killing curse, would shoot up to the sky from somewhere on the ground. The Dark Mark was his calling card and that’s when spells would start flying in every direction.

“Voldemort's biggest strength is fear,” Sirius concluded, locking eyes with Harry, “and nothing inspires more fear than facing invisible opponents ready to kill you with no hesitation or remorse whatsoever and knowing that any second could be your last and you wouldn't even see it coming.” Sirius took one last swig from his mug, put it down on the table and cradled it in his hands, appearing to be deep in thought.

It was disturbing for Harry to think he shared anything in common with the the man who had
murdered his family. The more he thought about it, the sicker it made him feel until he tricked himself into believing that he could feel it—that evil, the potential for it, resting inside him, lying dormant until he lost control again and didn’t have the will to hold back anymore.

His tea sloshed over the rim of the cup as he set it down.

Power had never been something favouring him, quite the opposite. Having no power at all, being powerless to watch and feel as others abused their own and took it out on him, that was something he was familiar with. With the roles effectively reversed, it left a bad taste in his mouth.

“I’m not bad,” Harry didn’t realize he’d spoken out loud. “I’m not—I can’t be evil, I don’t feel like I am, I don’t feel any different than I did before. Is this how it starts? I guess evil people don’t think they’re doing evil, otherwise they wouldn’t do it, right? So I can’t know now.” He was six years old again, asking his Aunt Petunia why everyone else in his class had someone to bring to Bring Your Parents To School Day except him.

“Merlin, Harry! You’re not evil, you’re just a boy who’s been put through the wringer one too many times and rightfully snapped a little,” said Sirius. “You can’t think that just because you unplanted a few trees that you’re gonna become the next Dark Lord. It doesn’t work that way.”

“If I have all this power and I can’t control it and someone gets hurt then how am I any better than Voldemort?”

“You won’t be rounding up and targeting half-bloods and magical creatures for one thing. You also won’t be purposefully using your power to hurt innocent people. You care, Harry, I know you do. Having a bit more magic than the rest of us doesn’t mean you’re bound to it, you are who you are and that won’t change unless you want it to.”

“By all accounts, you’re sitting next to a werewolf and a man who spent twelve years in Azkaban. We all have parts of us that we wish weren’t there,” Sirius’ hand squeezed around Remus’ arm when the man’s head bowed in shame, “but we work around them, Harry. That’s the only thing you can do.”

Silence reigned in the room. Harry allowed himself a moment to feel foolish for not remembering who he was talking to—he didn’t think that he could compare his struggles to Remus’ or Sirius’, they had decades of experience on Harry and all that much more time dealing with their own issues than he did. And despite their seasoned advice, he couldn’t shake himself from the fear that if he didn’t find some way to control his magic, it would burst from him the same way it had been itching to do at Privet Drive.

Only this time he wouldn’t leave it at some overturned patio furniture.

“You said they were ‘taking shifts’ or something like that. Back at the house,” Harry swallowed. “Someone’s been watching me? All this time? Is this why? So I won’t blow up my aunt and uncle like I did his sister.”

“You’re not on Dark Lord Watch, Harry,” Sirius took a gamble and rolled his eyes. “Taking out of there took some planning on our part and in order to do that we thought we’d take a look around before we went to get you, see which neighbour liked to take their dog for a walk or which nosy housewife spent too long watering her plants, that sort of thing.”

“We didn’t think we’d be the only ones checking in on you in that time,” Remus continued. “They’re not there everyday—I don’t think they have enough manpower to do that—but we discerned a pattern in their appearances and that’s why we scheduled our rendez-vous so late.”
“And these people,” Harry struggled with the term when all he wanted to do was call them what they were: enablers, jailers, “they’re all magical.”

“Most of them hid under Invisibility Cloaks. Not very good ones like the one your father had,” Remus smiled, “and others used Disillusionment Charms.”

“Who sent them?”

“We think Dumbledore. If it were ministry sanctioned they would’ve been wearing Auror robes and if they didn’t because they were undercover, then they still would have behaved a certain way that’s easy to recognize if you know what you’re looking for. These people were clearly untrained. Only someone like Dumbledore would have the influence and guts to do something like this under the Ministry’s nose.”

“He knew,” whispered Harry. “He knew this entire time what was going on and he didn’t—he wouldn’t even—he must have known, right?”

“We don’t know,” said Sirius. “We have no idea how long this has been going on or what type of information these people bring back to him. He most probably had his suspicions though, he’s not blind.”

Every word out of Sirius’ mouth shrunk Harry further and further into himself until he was left teetering on the edge of his seat with his arms wrapped around his folded legs. “I never wanted anyone to know. If he knew, suspected, then why did he send me there? Why didn’t he take me out once he saw…”

“That’s what we asked ourselves when we found out. Dumbledore is a lot of things and perhaps his worst quality is his ego, his sense of righteousness. The man was a force to be reckoned with during the last war and there have always been lines he wasn’t willing to cross.”

“But?”

“But he’s a spokesman for the greater good, if there ever was one,” said Sirius. “He would never stoop down to Voldemort’s level, do the horrible things he did, but if he believed one singular act of evil could end up saving the lives of millions...he wouldn’t hesitate.”

“The Dursleys’ house,” said Remus, “is surrounded by impenetrable wards. We can only guess as to what kind, but it doesn’t take a genius to understand that that’s why you were sent to live there. Have you ever wondered about that?”

“I thought I was sent to the Dursleys because they were my only relatives left alive who could take me in.”

“You got half of that right. They were, and still are, your only blood relatives but they were far from being the only ones willing to take care of you. You’re The Boy Who Lived, Harry. Witches and wizards would’ve been fighting against each other for the chance to raise the boy who’d saved the wizarding world. You see how people react to you to this day and it’s been twelve years. You did what no wizard, witch or army could ever accomplish.”

Harry couldn’t face the pleading, almost awed, expression overtaking Remus’ features. He lowered his eyes to the table and wilted the heat pooling at the back of his neck to disappear.

“The point is,” Sirius urged on, “Petunia is by far the closest blood relative to you. In the wizarding world, blood carries not just meaning, but power as well—magical power. In some ways, you couldn’t have been better protected. Remus couldn’t even set foot on the front lawn, he was turned
around and confunded to the point that I had to jinx him to get him back right.”

“I’m sure that’s why you did it,” grumbled Remus.

“It worked, didn’t it?” challenged Sirius.

“I’m more than half convinced it would’ve worn off on its own.”

“I couldn’t take that chance now, could I? You were hopping in circles like a rabbit chasing its tail.”

“Rabbits don’t chase their tails—”

“They know how ridiculous you looked.”

Though he valiantly tried to keep a stern expression, the corner of Remus’ lip twitched and he couldn’t hold himself back from sharing an incredulous laugh with his longtime friend—a feat he’d been certain he would never be able to do again.

“Werewolves are still registered as Dark Creatures and with wards like the ones around the Dursleys’ house, and I’m not talking just about the blood one, there are others too, it’s no surprise I was rejected before I could even get too close. And as is the case for wards relying on blood magic,” Remus tugged on his collar and straightened his posture, bringing Harry back to afternoon classes on grindylows and boggarts, “they require blood, though not in the physical sense that one might think of at first. Yours and your aunt’s presence together at the house would’ve been enough to keep the wards strong and charged. Couple of months during the summer for an entire year’s worth of protection, plus your childhood.”

“And now that I’m not there anymore to charge them up?” asked Harry. “What happens now?”

“They’ll weaken until they simply cease to exist. Disintegrate.”

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. “I hate the Dursleys but I don’t want them to be in danger because of me. They didn’t want any of this in the first place.”

“Those bastards deserve anything coming their way,” spat Sirius, eyes blazing.

“Only the blood wards will disappear,” said Remus, cutting weighed glances to Sirius, “the others will remain intact until someone purposefully brings them down. On the off chance that someone knows where you lived and goes looking for you, the Dursleys will be protected.”

Harry nodded. He let the quiet stretch for as long as he could while he sorted through his thoughts. His magic. Dumbledore. The Dursleys. He didn’t know where to start. Half an hour ago he wouldn’t’ve thought that the best part of the day would’ve been falling down the stairs to the wails of a shrieking banshee under the watchful eyes of beheaded house-elves mounted on the walls—but there it was.

“Voldemort’s gonna come back, you know,” he said. “He’s been trying for years now. The stone, the diary. He’s come so close and you know what’s stood in his way every single time? Me.”

Harry’s derisive snort made it clear it wasn’t a boast. “It’s not even on purpose, it’s like I get sucked in when something bad happens and it always leads back to Voldemort. To twelve years ago. It can’t be a coincidence.” Then he whispered to himself, “It’s just a matter of time.”

“It’s not a coincidence,” Sirius murmured softly. “There’s a prophecy, Harry. A prophecy only very few people know about. Voldemort wasn’t looking to kill Lily and James out of revenge. He was trying to prevent the prophecy from coming true and in doing so walked straight into its grasp. I think
maybe the reason why all this keeps happening to you is because you *are* connected to Voldemort through this prophecy. And you’ll continue to be pushed together until it can be fulfilled.

A strangled noise escaped from the bottom of Harry’s throat. He slapped a hand over his mouth and shut his eyes against the onslaught of tears that he could feel building up. Sirius was immediately at his side, on bent knees as he haltingly ran his fingers through his godson’s hair.

Harry made no other sound as Sirius did his best to comfort him. The more time that passed however, the tenser Harry became until he shook Sirius’ hand off of him and jumped to his feet. He marched up to the window, arms crossed, and kept his back to them.

“Who knew?”

Remus and Sirius exchanged worried looks.

“Your parents told us in case anything were to happen to them,” Remus said carefully, “Thinking back on it now, it’s just our luck that Peter couldn’t make it to that dinner. Alice and Frank—the Longbottoms—they knew. You and their boy Neville fit the description. They were told by Dumbledore who heard it straight from the oracle’s mouth. A Death Eater was there, too. He overheard the second half of the prophecy before he was kicked out.”

Harry’s deep, controlled breaths echoed in the room.

“Who?”

“That’s all we know. Either Dumbledore didn’t know either, or he didn’t want to say,” said Sirius.

“So he only knows half of it,” whispered Harry. “You know what it said? The prophecy. The exact words.”

“Could never forget even if I wanted to.” Sirius cleared his throat. “*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.*”

A beat passed. The hitch in Harry’s breathing was politely ignored.

“Anything else? Was that all of it?” Harry turned around to face the two men and locked eyes on them.

“That’s not enough?” Sirius laughed with no mirth.

“Maybe you should take some time to process, Harry,” implored Remus. “You don’t have to think about it now, you have time and you can—”

“Do you know that for sure?” interrupted Harry. “Would you bet your life on it? I’m thirteen years old and I’ve faced Voldemort three times! That’s already the same amount as my parents, right? That’s why they were killed.” On uttering those words, Harry seemed to deflate before their very eyes. He disappeared into his cousin’s old clothes and all that was left was a pair of emerald eyes staring at them from the face of a young boy.

“I’ve been at the centre of every terrible thing that’s happened in the wizarding world since before I even knew about it and if I let this get to me now… Well.”
“You’re allowed to feel whatever you want, Harry,” said Remus. “This doesn’t change that and we certainly wouldn’t hold it against you if you’re feeling scared, angry, betrayed.”

“Yeah, no. Thanks. Saw it, bought it, tried it—didn’t work out that well for me, believe it or not,” Harry said. “Moony, I’m trapped either way. I feel that. I can take it kicking, screaming and whining, or I can do something about it for once instead of waiting for the next disaster to hit.”

His words rang strong, but there was something desperate and pleading hovering on the wrinkles in the corners of his mouth, the set of his eyes, the dip of his chin. Something that was sending them smoke signals, ordering them not to push any harder, that said touch me and I might just break.

“All right, all right,” Sirius’ hands were palms out front as though he were warding off traffic. “If that’s what you want.”

Harry’s scoff turned into a snort midway.

“What I want? I think we’re a bit far from that at this point. If I’d had it my way, and enough money to do it, I would’ve at least tried running away ages ago to live on my own. Would’ve been better off. I wouldn’t be that poor, misfit kid from the nice neighbourhood; I’d just be that poor kid.”

“I’m glad you never followed through then,” said Sirius. “If you had, then there’s no telling what would’ve happened to you, me, Remus… You’d hardly be living in a slump with all the money in your vaults but I’d like to think it’s still better this way.”

“Vault,” Harry tutted out the ‘t’. “Griphook said there’s only enough money in there to last me through school and I don’t think funding my running away is what my parents had in my mind.”

“You’ve got your other vaults.” When Remus received only a blank look in return, he demanded, “You must know about your other vaults. You’re the last surviving heir to the Potter family line and you thought the only thing left to you was a school trust fund?”

“I—I guess I never really thought about it,” stammered Harry. “That’s one of the main things the Dursleys always complained about, that I was just a drain on what little they had.”

“If your family wasn’t so outspoken with their beliefs, your family would likely still be part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” Sirius appeared amused.

“The what?”

“The Most Ancient and Noble Houses in wizarding Britain. Another way of knowing who the most influential and rich families are based on pureblood status,” lectured Remus. “It is those families that have seats in the Wizengamot along with some other select few who didn’t make the cut but who’re still respected in the community. The Potters retained their seat, yes?”

“Oh they most certainly did. One of the greatest thorns by mother’s side along with the traitor Weasleys,” laughed Sirius.

“No one ever told me any of this,” said Harry, thinking that for someone whose family was so entrenched in wizarding history, he was sure he’d never felt more estranged from it than he did at that moment.

Some of his thoughts must have shown on his face because Sirius said, “These things—the customs, traditions and rules, they’re usually passed down the family line from a young age. Purebloods grow up learning these things so it’s no surprise you don’t know about them. It’s stupid and outdated, the epitome of wizarding bigotry. I was force-fed these ridiculous rules myself but that doesn’t mean
They’re worth knowing, Harry. The old farts sitting on the Wizengamot and running the government need a good shake out of their precious traditions if you ask me. Navigating your way through wizarding politics the way they do—it’s like playing wizard chess.”

“Make a wrong move and I’ll be hit over the head with a chair?”

“You’d be surprised,” grinned Sirius.

Harry smiled back at him. It didn’t last long when the thought came to him that in the three years he’d been a part of the wizarding world, he hadn’t even learned the basics of his lineage and missed out on a connection to his family that he could’ve had all along.

“These vaults;” he began, “they’re mine. I can see them?”

“You’re still underage but with your legal guardian present, you’re welcome to explore the vaults as you please, though they will only truly be accessible to you without my express permission once you reach maturity. Seventeen in the wizarding world,” explained Sirius.

“The goblins are a neutral people here to make business,” continued Remus, “they won’t care that Sirius is wanted by the Ministry and would only turn him in if they had something to gain from it. As it stands now Sirius is the head of the Black family, one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Goblins don’t care much for wizard politics but even so, they know what having a family as powerful as the Blacks on their side could mean.”

“I say it’s about time that confidentiality clause worked in our favour,” Sirius grinned wolfishly. “Was getting tired of only Death Eaters getting all the money perks around here.”

Harry squinted at the term and Remus said, “That’s what Voldemort’s followers called themselves.”

“Fitting.”

A grandfather clock rang from somewhere inside the house, its clangs reached the residents sitting at the kitchen table and provided a blanket of welcome distraction as they each dwelled on their own inner musings.

Sirius recalled the last time he sat at that table, mother and father still alive, brother a Death Eater in the making, Kreacher hobbling and prancing around his mother’s every whim. Perhaps the only activity they shared in as a family were those few seconds they each reserved to glare at Sirius, clad in red and gold from head to toe as he regaled them with tales he knew they would disapprove of and he’d be punished for later but couldn’t find it in himself to care for the look of outrage and fury on his parents’ faces.

Remus was thinking back to the war. To nights spent huddled around together in headquarters—a different one each week to keep the Death Eaters on their toes. He remembered James, messy hair just like his son’s getting in his eyes as he leaned over a map spread on a rickety old table, moving dots representing enemies and friends clashing against each other in chaotic lines of violence. Lily was off to the side, talking to Mad-Eye and Alice Longbottom in wild gestures and punching a fist to her hand to prove a point before jabbing her wand and barking an order.

They were an unstoppable force—bright and unparalleled by almost any other. They were water and oil poured into each other, working together seamlessly as they glided against one another but never losing their own essence, the spark that made them who they were, separated and together. They could win you over in a heartbeat and knock you out with a well-place spell in the next.

It was the first time in over a decade that memories of his friends didn’t crash into him like a tidal
wave of grief, threatening to become the whirlpool that would pull him under to unchartered new depths of depression.

Harry thought of his parents, too. He thought of what they might’ve left him in the vaults he hadn’t been told her had. He thought of what would’ve happened if they were still alive, if his father would’ve taken him to see the Potter legacy himself or if he would’ve saved it for his seventeenth birthday—the best present he could possibly get after years of listening to stories of the great things their ancestors accomplished and stowed away forever.

He wondered if his parents ever had outbursts like his, if they’d ever been scared of the magic they carried within, thinking it made them equal parts blessed and cursed as they’d be shunned by both worlds if they ever let themselves get out of control. Harry stared at the palms of his hands and saw canyons in the creased lines of skin, saw caves hidden in the dips between fingers and railroads mapping the tracks of his life in the pads of his fingers.

Lastly, he thought that with his parents by his side, he would’ve never known what it was like to feel amongst one’s own kind.

“Is there any way you could teach me other stuff, too?” asked Harry, middle finger running along the shape of his left eyebrow. “Everyone else in the wizarding world, they know more than me about everything. My first day at Hogwarts and Hermione was the one to tell me that they’d written books about me—everyone knew who I was before I even realized it myself. I didn’t fit in the muggle world because I’m a wizard and now I don’t feel like I fit in the wizarding world either because I was raised completely as a muggle.

“It would just be… good, if I wasn’t the last to everything for once.” His green eyes bore into them imploringly and Sirius and Remus had no problem caving in to his wish.

“We’re here for anything you need. Between the two of us, I think we have a pretty good range of things to teach you, we had a reputation to upkeep as the Hogwarts pranksters but that doesn’t mean we were slouches,” said Remus.

“If anything, pranking helped us to become better students, better men to our fellow neighbours,” — Remus scoffed loudly— “and those are values I could not, in good conscience, allow you to live your like without. For what is a man, if not the sum of his best pranks and—”

“We would love to help you, Harry. We can start off by showing you your vaults. Gringotts opens its doors upon the first rays of sunlight in the morning, we’ll be the only ones there for a couple of hours if we plan it right. We’d have to disguise you for the time being of course as we can’t have anyone recognizing you once your disappearance makes its rounds to certain people.” Remus turned to Sirius and said, “We’ll have to send a post owl to Dumbledore and let him go Harry is safe with us. It likely won’t deter him from conducting his own search but at least he won’t alert the authorities. The less people who know you’re gone, Harry, the better.”

“Then you’re gonna have to add one more person to that list because I already told someone I was leaving the Dursleys. I didn’t say where or that it was even you,” he rushed out, “but she should definitely know I’m not in Privet Drive by now. Ginny won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

Sirius and Remus stared at each other in silent conversation.

“Any other of your friends know you’re gone?”

“I didn’t have the time to write them anything too, just Ginny,” Harry bit his lip.
“Let’s keep it that way then,” Harry had a protest ready on the tip of his tongue, but Sirius said, “for now. Until we’re sure you’re safe here.”

Harry nodded reluctantly.

Sirius gathered up the cups and took them to the sink to wash, Remus standing at his side with a dishtowel ready at hand. They put away the cups in silence which was only disrupted when Sirius took out a knife and began dicing vegetables, back turned to Harry as he spoke.

“This Ginny girl, she wouldn’t happen to be the Weasley’s girl. Ginevra, was it?”

“Yeah, her brother, Ron, is my best mate. Ginny is a year below us.”

Sirius hummed. “They’re all redheads, right? Even the girl.”

Harry saw Remus elbow his godfather in the ribs.

“Well, yeah. Hers is a bit different though, a deeper shade, more like fire than orange like her brothers’. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Sirius emptied his vegetables into a pot of water and turned on the fire. “She pretty?”

“Padfoot,” warned Remus, though he hid a smile behind the collar of his sweater.

“Yes.” Sirius and Remus swivelled around to look him in the eye and Harry felt a glaring warmth spread across his neck and up to his cheeks. “I mean, I haven’t really noticed, but I suppose she is.” He sprang to his feet and kept his eyes focused on his hands as he took needless care to wash them in the sink.

Remus and Sirius hummed in response. The rest of the meal was prepared in companionable silence.
Chapter 3

For the first time ever, Diagon Alley was empty. Not a single witch or wizard could be seen rushing along the cobbled streets of the magical marketplace. The early morning hush was so absolute, it had become akin to white noise dancing in the background of his mind, where his memories went to rest and allowed his instincts to flare with promise.

The sun had yet to show its brilliant face, but the sky had begun to brighten with the first rays of orange-pink light, hitting the three individuals standing in the middle of the street at an angle that stretched their shadows far and wide so that they could climb up walls and sit atop the roofs of buildings like vigilant gargoyles.

Harry caught his reflection in a shop window and had to resist the urge to card his hand through the blonde, curly hair, or run his finger along the bridge of the pointy nose, maybe even trace his scarless forehead—treasure these few moments where he got to escape into someone else, an unremarkable stranger with a nameless face and forgettable brown eyes.

It was an illusion in any case. Glamours were just as the name described them to be and if he were to grab a lock of hair, he’d undoubtedly feel the familiar texture of his own head of black hair and his scar was still there, it would never fade.

The creaking of the burnished bronze doors being dragged open brought him out of his own mind. Remus and Sirius automatically moved so that they were now standing on either side of Harry, shoulders brushing each other’s. Two goblins clothed in red and golden robes strode out of the bank and seized their places at the sides of the door. They did not acknowledge Harry, Sirius or Remus. Their eyes slid over them like they were seeing beyond what was visible, into a different layer to the existence they were living in now.

They climbed up the stairs and the goblins didn’t so much as flinch when they walked past. The hairs on his arms stood on end and Harry rushed through the last steps but stopped short when the message carved over their heads caught his attention.

Enter, stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.

“Come on, Harry,” Sirius grasped his sleeve and pulled him into the bank. “No time for dilly-dallying, won’t be long before the bank starts filling up with customers and we want to be long gone before then.”

They found themselves in a long, marble hall filled with hundreds of counters stretching along its length, each with a goblin ready to hold court, stack of papers piled high by their elbows, quills dipped in fresh ink. There were doors laid into the walls behind each counter, they led to the thousands of secure vaults hidden underneath the city of London.

The three wizards stopped in the middle of the hall and peered around. None of the goblins offered them any insight as to where they were supposed to go, they hadn’t even glanced up from their desks
but Harry was sure that they were all fully aware that they were there. Sirius and Remus turned to Harry expectantly.

“What are you looking at me for?” he said. “It’s not like I’ve done this before and they probably don’t even know who I am,” he pointed to his glamoured face.

“Those aren’t enough to fool the goblins,” said Remus, “they use a different type of magic than wizards and it’s very likely they’ll be able to see straight through those glamours. They knew who we were the moment we stepped foot in their bank.”

“Not much you can hide from a goblin without trying real hard,” added Sirius.

“So what should we do now?” Harry asked.

“You mentioned a goblin yesterday, the one who told you about your vault the first time round. D’you see him anywhere?”

Harry ran his eyes around the hall. He spotted dozens of goblins walking to and fro from door to door, ducking behind tapestries only to reappear on the other side of the room moments later, laden with papers, sacks of gold or, in one particular case, a wheelbarrow carrying thirteenth century armour.

“I think that might be him,” he pointed at a goblin at the far back examining an incredibly large ruby through some sort of magnifying glass. “When we came here with Hagrid he was the one that took us down with the cart and opened my vault.”

“Are you sure?”

Harry hesitated slightly. “Well—I mean, yeah. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was him,”

“Alright, let’s go.”

They strode over to the goblin’s counter and positioned themselves in front of it, dwarfed by the sheer mass of the wooden structure.

When he didn't acknowledge their presence Remus cleared his throat and pointedly coughed out, “Sir, excuse us.”

Griphook glanced up at the wizard through round spectacles and used his trained eyes to examine him carefully.

From the look of his clothes alone he could already tell that this man was waiting at the wrong counter. They were well-worn, patched up in some places, and his shoes were in dire need of a good polish. The man standing before him did not come from money and he obviously hadn’t acquired much over the years either. Griphook only dealt with those vaults that belonged to the wealthy and old families of the magical world and this man was neither. He let his gaze rest on him for a few more seconds before turning away.

Griphook blinked twice when he came face to face with one Sirius Black, who was staring back at him steadily through steel grey orbs. The man’s features were distorted from spells that would more than suffice in fooling wizards and witches alike yet couldn’t hold a candle to a goblin. Griphook narrowed his eyes and inwardly got a thrill at the awkward shuffle he’d evoked.

The goblin was not unaware of the rumours circulating around Black’s escape, that he was wanted by the Ministry was no secret, but ultimately if the man wasn’t there to cause trouble, Griphook
knew the goblin nation had no incentive to get involved in wizard politics. Black had done nothing against them, after all, and his family had been important clients to the bank for generations. Although recent years had seen their activity severely decline since the fall of Voldemort, being accredited for the return of a Lord Black would no doubt do wonders for Griphook’s career.

“Lord Black,” he began, “it is a pleasure to see you walk these halls once more. How may I be of assistance today?”

“I’m not the one in need of help today, Griphook. Harry here is the one who wants to take a look at his vaults for the first time.” Sirius gestured with a movement of his head at the boy standing in front of him, covered from sight by the tall counter.

“Oh, I remember you, thought Griphook. The plot thickens.

There was no mistaking who he was. His unruly black hair, brilliant green eyes and lightning shaped scar more than confirmed it for him. Griphook did not bat an eye at the revelation and simply said, “Follow me.”

Remus and Sirius waited for Griphook to hop down from his chair and then followed him across the hall and through a small door on the wall. They emerged into an office with a desk at the far end of the room and two chairs across from it. Bookcases filled with books and files stood on either side of the room and antique looking settees (Harry was sure he’d seen the same ones in Aunt Marge’s living room) made up the inside of the office.

“Mr Potter,” said Griphook, walking towards him with a wooden bowl in hand. “We need proof of familial descent before we are allowed to release your vaults to you. Your blood will satisfy the process.”

Harry laughed a little hysterically and back up from the goblin. “Pardon me?”

“You blood,” Griphook repeated. The goblin placed the bowl on the desk and took out a dagger from inside his robe and approached Harry with keen purpose.

Harry’s immediate reaction was to draw out his wand and have it pointed directly at the space between the goblin’s two eyes. Griphook stopped in his tracks and looked at Harry with black eyes, entirely unimpressed by the performance. Harry relaxed his stand but it was Remus who had to lower the boy’s wand arm for him.

Harry shook his head from side to side, warding off the primordial instincts that had fallen over common sense like a thick cloud and pocketed his wand. Embarrassment washed over him when he noticed that Griphook was still staring at him mildly suspiciously, as one would a child throwing a tantrum.

“I am so sorry, Mr Griphook, I didn’t mean to point my wand at you. I apparently don’t react too well to someone coming at me with a knife.”

“You would hardly be the first wizard to do so, Mr Potter, and you certainly won’t be the last. Wizards are curious in that sense.” Griphook’s voice was completely level and Harry had no clue how he should take that comment. Remus laughed weakly but it was quickly cut off when no one joined in and he trailed off into awkward coughing.

“So what do you need my blood for, exactly? What are you going to do with it?” asked Harry.

“Only a small sample is needed to prove that you are Potter by blood. It is not uncommon for a witch or wizard to come in here and claim to be someone they’re not in order to, as you humans say, ‘dip a
hand in the family cauldron’. We have always caught them in the act before and it is because of our rigorous security measures. There is no safer place for your valuables than in the hands of our goblins at Gringotts.”

Griphook, once again, walked up to Harry with the dagger in his hands. Harry closed his eyes and practiced bracing himself for the pain (it wouldn’t be the first time).

When none came, he opened his eyes and sought out the goblin, finding him still standing in front of him, this time with the dagger held out in both hands and offering it up to him. Was he supposed to actually stab himself with it? Harry supposed that if there was one way to ensure a thief didn’t get very far was to have them hinder themselves whilst trying to prove they were the person whose money they were planning on stealing.

He hesitantly reached out and took the blade from the goblin's hands. He brought it up to eye level and took his time observing it (stalling). He turned it this way and that, admiring the stones and gems embedded in the handle and the way they played with the light spilling into the room. He gripped it in his hand and marvelled at how comfortable it felt in his hand, like it was meant to be there.

There was something to it. An echo, a shimmer, or maybe a shadow that begged him to look closer. It was compulsive, Harry decided, he didn’t feel the need to do anything, but he could sense the potential for it, as if a ghostly voice in the back of his mind was whispering instructions that he wasn’t meant to hear.

He ran his fingers over the blade, felt several bumps and ridges and raised it higher, so that the metal could catch on the light and that’s when he spotted the words carved in a language he’d never seen before.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Gobbledygook, the language of all goblins. It is a warning that we had engraved on the blade after some… unfortunate incidents with a couple of wizards that thought they could deceive us.”

Something close to a reminiscent smile crossed Griphook’s face.

Harry shook his head and insisted, “It’s more than that, there’s something else. I can't see it, but I can feel it. There’s magic here and it’s almost like it wants to pull me in. Can’t you feel it?” He thrust the blade into Remus’ hands. The wizard weighed it, brought it up to his ear, ran it across the back of his hand, even held it against his lips like he was checking for a temperature, but in the end he handed it back with a shrug.

“I don’t feel anything strange. It’s just an ordinary blade.”

Now that it was back in his possession, Harry could sense it again and knew that Remus had to be wrong. He felt eyes on him and found Griphook eyeballing him.

“The blade has been infused with goblin magic,” Griphook admitted. “Very few wizards are able to detect magic and fewer still can recognize goblin magic.”

“What does it do?”

“You felt an impression of it yourself: it is a version of your Compulsion Charm, only this one works off fear and lies. If you were to hold that blade in your hands and lie to us, you would very suddenly find yourself with the inexplicable urge to ensure you are unable to tell a lie ever again. We had to remove the carpets from all our offices after things got slightly… messy.” Griphook grinned and showed off two full rows of teeth sharpened to needle points.
Harry struggled not to give in to the urge to stumble back, out of reach of that deadly smile and those gleeful eyes. He noticed Sirius and Remus had gone curiously still.

“I see,” said Harry.

“Quite. Now, if you would cut your finger and let some of your blood drip into this bowl, then we could get this started.”

“Right,” muttered Harry, “cut myself with the magic dagger of death.”

Sirius snorted and even Remus looked amused, though he tried not to be and levelled a reproachful glare at his friend.

“You have nothing to lie about,” said Remus, “the most you’ll get is a papercut.”

Harry gripped the dagger tight and then quickly, without thinking too much, dragged his thumb over its edge. He winced at the sharp sting.

He had expected the drop of crimson liquid to hit the wooden surface and that to be the end of it. So naturally, he was more than surprised when it hit an invisible barrier and continued to be absorbed into nothing other than air. He leaned in to take a closer look and watched as the very spot where the blood had sunk in began to rapidly gain colour, turning into a silvery grey which turned into wisps of smoke which spun around each other in senseless circles until they became tangled and formed a rotating sphere.

It hung in the air like a ball from a Christmas tree.

Harry exchanged a single glance with both Sirius and Remus, but they shrugged their shoulder and didn’t say a word.

The ball had begun to spin fast, then faster and faster until it became a blur and just as abruptly winked out of existence. A piece of paper fluttered out from the rupture in space and Griphook snatched it between finger and thumb. He read it out loud.

“Harry James Potter, last descendant of the Potter line, owner of vaults 313, 12891, 14812 and 15001, just as our records state. Vault 15001, as you already know, is your school vault and is the only which is accessible to you alone at this time. The other three may only be accessed with your guardian at your side so Mr Black’s presence here today has made our task all the much simpler.”

As he spoke, Griphook moved to the back of the room where a pull of a book and a combination of secret words had the bookcase splitting in half to uncover hundreds of tiny drawers set into the wall. He pulled on three of them and then let the mechanism slide shut.

“The keys to your vaults Mr Potter.” He slid three heavy, old keys across the desk.

“Thank you, but are you sure these are all mine? I already have the key to my school vault and I only expected to have one more, not three,” said Harry.

“As I said, you are only meant to have access to your school vault for the remainder of your school years since your other vaults require you to become of age before you can officially stake your claim. While they do belong to you, your magical guardian is the one in charge of handling the inheritance until you have been deemed fit to do so yourself as per your parents’ wishes,” Griphook explained with all the patience of a veteran public servant.

“It’s too much,” Harry muttered. “Where do they even come from? How much is in them? Do I have
to do something with them because I don’t—I honestly have no idea what I should do here. Oh Merlin… do I have investments? I don’t even know how those work!”

“Calm down, pup, you’re winding yourself up over nothing. The money’s been there all this time you didn’t know about it and no one asked you to do anything. I’m technically the one that has to take care of it anyway so you have nothing to worry about,” said Sirius, shooting Remus the stink-eye when the other man snorted at his last comment.

“As I understand it, any investments, properties or stocks are taken care of by the bank in your absence. It all lasted twelve years without anyone else looking over it and even when it’s all turned over to you, there’s not much that needs to be done, really,” said Remus. “Is that right?”

“One could put it that way, yes,” Griphook pursed his lips. “Though I wouldn’t say there’s ‘not much to be done’ about my life’s work. Since your parents’ deaths I have been personally overseeing your fortune, Mr Potter. It is a goblin’s duty to do so until the day he dies and when that should happen, a successor will take my place.”

“O–Of course not, I apologize. I meant no disrespect, Mr Griphook,” Remus blushed fiercely.

Griphook, however, waved a dismissive hand in Remus’ direction and turned away, crouching down behind his desk to pull on a concealed door which opened up a trapdoor. He reached in and liberated an aged tome that had seen better centuries if Harry had to guess. The book trembled as Griphook rested a wrinkled hand on the cover until, with a very human sigh of relief, the tome shuddered one last time and its pages flopped open to the sides.

“Here it is. Vault 313 has been occupied by the same family for generations, since the third decade after the bank was first opened in fact,” Griphook read. “Although they began with a different name, the Potters’ time with Gringotts has been very generous to them indeed, to the point that the wealth you now own could rival that of pureblood families such as Malfoy, Greengrass and Longbottom, though not quite there yet with the Blacks.”

Harry’s head was a spinning teacup at a muggle amusement park while his stomach was being held hostage on board the roller coaster.

“The Malfoys are filthy rich,” Harry protested, “they bought an entire quidditch team brand new brooms because they could.”

*Ron is going to flip when I tell him,* Harry thought.

Griphook raised an eyebrow. “The Potters are a relatively young magical family compared to others in this bank, but they have been wise with their investments and have continued to bring back many riches for Gringotts to protect.” From the way the goblin puffed out his chest Harry surmised it was a point of pride for him.

“The other vaults,” said Sirius. “I remember Lily opened her own when she started to work so that must be one of them.”

“Number 14812 to be exact. Unfortunately, it was only used for a couple of years before the Potters retreated from society. Compared to the money in your school vault, Mr Potter, your mother’s savings amount to perhaps half of that, less even as it was only her wages which were deposited.” Griphook turned the page on the tomb and squinted at the strange letters. “Vault 12891 on the other hand, contains a bit more, including the deed to a property here in England. Mr and Mrs Evans established it shortly after Mrs Potter began Hogwarts to pay for the school and that is also where they left their inheritance for their daughter.”
Harry rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, pulling his glasses askew. He imagined for a moment that he was in a muggle fitness programme and took in deep, cleansing breaths like the woman on television used to tell Aunt Petunia.

It was just so much. Less than a few days ago he'd been sitting on his paper thin mattress at his aunt and uncle's where the wallpaper in his bedroom was peeling off and there was a suspicious looking stain growing on the corner of his ghostly mattress. Now here he was at Gringotts with Remus and his godfather being told by a goblin that not only was he filthy rich, he also had a new link to his parents and three new vaults brimming with possible relics from his family’s past lives.

“Can I see them?” he asked. “Sirius is here already and I don’t think we have time to visit all of them but I want to see the Potter vault before we have to leave.”

The goblin looked him up and down appraisingly then nodded. “Very well. Mr Black’s presence is necessary to bypassing the security measures for you humans, however, as to Mr…?”

“Lupin, but just Remus will do fine,” said Remus.

Griphook’s face twisted into the first real show of emotion that he allowed to escape since the three wizard’s arrival: a squinty grimace.

“As to Mr Lupin,” he emphasized, “he is not a spouse, a guardian or a blood relative. The wards protecting the vaults will not permit him entrance.”

“But he’s—”

“That will be no problem, I’ll wait outside,” said Remus, interrupting Harry. “Magic, especially of the goblin variety, can be a force to be reckoned with and I truly do not want to get caught in the crossfire, Harry.”

As Harry reluctantly agreed, he noticed that although the goblin let nothing slip, Harry still got the distinct impression that he was nonetheless impressed by Remus’ assessment and that the wizard may have unknowingly fast-tracked himself into Griphook’s good graces.

“This way then,” grunted Griphook, leading them out of the office through a corridor which opened up to the underground rails system. A cart was already waiting for them and Griphook jumped on board without breaking his stride. The cart lurched to a start as soon as they were all on board. Harry felt his stomach drop to his knees just like when he mounted his broom.

The ride down to the vault was anything but smooth. It was riddled with bumps, twists, turns, hops and swerves at speeds that defied the laws of physics when the cart’s passengers weren’t immediately thrown over the edge. Harry loved it. He loved feeling the cold wind on his face, ruffling his hair; how the speed made him feel alive.

What made it even better was seeing the way Sirius' face lit up with childish excitement and the gigantic grin that spread across his face. He’d never seen Sirius this happy before, he was even leaning over the side of the cart, forcing a queasy looking Remus to grab him by his robe and reel him back in.

Harry only wished the werewolf was having a better time of it. It seemed he had a thing for speed—and not in a good way. He hadn’t moved a muscle except to hold onto Sirius and even seemed to regret going that far. He had sweat glistening on his forehead which brought his sickly complexion into shocking light as they passed under scattered lanterns on their journey.

“Are you okay Remus? You don’t look too good.”
“Mm fine, Harry,” he slurred. “Don't worry about me. Once we get back on firm land I'll be as good as new.” Remus offered him a weak smile then hurriedly put his head between his knees. Harry patted him on the back sympathetically.

“Mr Potter,” Griphook said, “We'll be arriving soon and I need you to be prepared.” He handed him a brass bell and gave out two more to Remus and Sirius.

They were engulfed in darkness as they passed through a tunnel.

“Prepared? Prepared for what?”

A terrifying roar echoed through the tunnel and made the car they were on tremble on the tracks. Harry’s eyes nearly popped out of his head when he caught sight of what was waiting for them.

Two gigantic dragons were tethered to the ground. They were chained a few metres in front of a metal door embossed with a crest. Both beasts were beautiful. Their scales were a deep blue, like amethyst, and shone under the light of the flame torches. Their bodies were long and sleek, extending almost half the length of the cave. They had their wings folded up against their backs, but Harry estimated that if they opened them they would easily span the length of the chamber.

The dragons must have heard them approach, for the smaller of the two snapped its head in their direction and stomped to position itself between them and the other dragon. Griphook chose that moment to jump off the cart and the dragon standing closest to them roared at a pitch that shook cave they were in. The dragon opened its mouth and let out a stream of jet blue fire.

Griphook agilely ducked out of its trajectory and began ringing the bell in his hand. The noise bounced back at them against the rocky walls and had both dragons recoiling into themselves. The goblin kept advancing on them until he had them cornered against the wall, curled around one another with their wings trembling underneath layers of chains and magic.

“...enough...mercy...no more...leave us…”

“Did you hear that?” Harry asked Sirius.

“The sound of my eardrums imploding? Kinda hard to miss.” Sirius grimaced and clapped his right hand over his ear, but kept the other on the stolen wand pointed at the two dragons.

“...kill them all, anything to stop this...Enough!...leave us…”

“I’m serious, did you hear that?” Harry insisted, going so far as to yank on his godfather’s arm.

“No, pup, pretty sure I’m Sirius in this scenario and I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but now’s really not the time.”

“...leave...just go…”

Harry let himself be shaken off. He stayed put as Remus and Sirius inched closer to the dragons, ringing their bells with one hand and pointing their wands with the other.

Although he hadn’t seen anyone enter the cave with them, Harry briefly entertained the thought that the voice had been carried over from someplace else, but dismissed the thought as soon as it came. It wouldn’t explain why he was the only one who heard it and he tried not to let that little tidbit get to him yet, but he was unsurprisingly reminded of his second year. Harry wouldn’t put it past the goblins to have one of those guarding their vaults, but he’d be quite happy in the knowledge that only one type of giant, deadly reptile was lurking around the corners of this underground maze…
“STOP!” He jumped off the cart and ran. “Stop banging those bells, you’re hurting them,” Harry yelled.

He circled around the goblin and snatched the bell from his hands, throwing it far out of reach before doing the same to two gaping wizards. The dragons recovered fast. Harry whirled around to see the smaller of the two (still the size of five cars put together) rose on its back legs and trained its slitted eyes on Harry, momentarily striking him dumb.

“Harry!” hissed Remus. “Move out of the way! Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“They’re not going to kill me, they’re just scared and in pain. We just have to talk to them, we can’t —”

“Harry James Potter, for Merlin’s sake, get back here right now before I go get you myself,” Sirius threatened, though the effect was somewhat lost as he had to whisper for fear of spooking the beasts into action.

“Mr Potter, this is not a game. Move out of the way so that we may contain the dragons.” Griphook made to move back, in the direction of his fallen bell, but a plume of fire hitting exactly where he wanted to go stopped him right in his tracks.

“No, wait!” Harry exclaimed. “Just don’t move a muscle. I just need to talk to them.”

“What the hell are you thinking? You can’t reason with dragons, Harry. Quit being daft and come back here, we’ll distract them.”

Harry didn’t so much as offer a glance back. He thought of snakes—cold skin, glistening scales, poisonous fangs, yellow slitted eyes and hissing… He opened his eyes to the dragon throwing back its head with its jaws opened wide and the first embers of fire brewing in its mouth.

“Don’t hurt him.” Harry hissed. “I made them stop. This is my vault you’re protecting and I won’t let them hurt you anymore for it.”

The dragon’s teeth snapped against each other as it closed its mouth and moved closer to its partner. They stared at Harry.

“You lie, human.” The bigger of the two took a menacing step towards Harry and bared her teeth. “Humans lie.”

“I promise I’m not. Look.” Harry dared taking an eye off the magical creatures and caught the men’s attention with a jerky wave. “Destroy them. The bells.”

“Harry, wha—”

“Just do it!”

The blast was small, but pieces of the benign weapon still managed to whip against Harry’s clothes as the dragons stood their ground and watched.

“See?” Neither dragon said anything. “There is a reserve; a place where dragons are taken care of and can be free without chains, under the open sky. I can get you there if—”

“Do it,” the smaller of the two—the male—ordered him. “We’ve been enslaved for decades and no one has been able to speak to us like you.”
“Get us out,” hissed the female, “set us free, Speaker, and we spare your companions.”

“Trick us,” warned the other, “and they burn.”

To emphasize their point, the female twisted to the side to reveal a nest of twigs, rocks and dirt scattered with skeletal remains in various states of decomposition. A head that was half face and half bone stared at Harry from between the dragon’s legs. He felt himself break out in a cold sweat, but he couldn’t let it show.

“Let us pass without attacking anyone and I’ll have you out of here as soon as possible.” Harry was proud that his speech wasn’t shaking as much as his hands were as that would have ruined whatever progress he’d made with the creatures.

The dragons turned their backs on him and trudged to their nest, clearing the path to the Potter vault and taking Harry’s last remaining strength with them. He would’ve fallen over, flat on his face, had it not been for Remus rushing to his side just in time.

“So the rumours are true,” he said. “You speak Parseltongue. I thought it was something the papers had made up to sell the Chamber of Secrets; not that it needed anything else to be sold, mind you, but that seemed more likely than talking to snakes somehow.”

“How did you know it would work?” asked Sirius, running over Harry’s form with a critical eye.

“I didn’t,” Harry shrugged, “I just knew that if I could understand them, then chances were they’d understand me and maybe their surprise would work in my favour.”

“You had no way of proving that, not without risking your life the way you did,” Remus admonished him.

“They were in pain, they just wanted it to stop,” Harry argued, fighting to keep his eyes focused as the weight of the past quarter hour settled heavy on his shoulders and eyelids. “You don’t think I’m the next Dark Lord, then?”

“Hardly,” Sirius scoffed. He quieted down, however, when he saw that Harry had wordlessly turned away to shuffle up to the vault. “Having a special ability doesn’t make you any darker or more evil than being a vampire, a werewolf or coming from a purely Slytherin family,” —Sirius had ambled up to Harry and placed himself in his way, directing the boy’s attention only to himself— “it’s about what you choose to do with that part of yourself that counts.”

“Right.” Harry sidestepped Sirius and missed the frown which bloomed on his godfather’s face.

“You understand this is highly unorthodox.” Griphook sprung up by Harry’s elbow and nearly gave him a heart attack. “I don’t know what you promised those beasts, but—”

“The only reason they’re here is to protect this vault, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I don’t want them here anymore. Fire them and take them to a reserve in Romania where they can be free without hurting anyone.” Harry said resolutely.

“They do not belong to the Potter line, they are property of Gringotts bank.”

“I have money now, apparently. I can put it to good use and buy them off you, they’ll be better off with proper dragon keepers than they ever were here. They’ll be taken care of properly and won’t
have to spend who knows how many more decades chained in an underground cave.” Harry stopped
walking and turned to Griphook, catching the goblin already examining him closely. “I don’t need
them here and neither do you. All those security measure you mentioned don’t need to include two
dragons being tortured for the sake of a handful of galleons.”

“This is unprecedented, there has never been…” Griphook visibly held back his tongue and
continued staring at Harry before he uttered, “If that is your wish, I will speak to the necessary
authorities and see what can be done.”

Harry felt dizzy when he recognized the goblin’s tone—it was the same one he’d heard his uncle use
thousands of times when dealing with clients. It was the tone that said ‘I don’t agree with what
you’re saying, but I’ll do it anyway because you’re my superior here and this is my job’.

“It is. Thank you, Griphook,” whispered Harry.

Griphook offered him a sharp nod and Harry felt some of that earlier wooziness creep up on him and
threaten to become nausea. The goblin stepped away and began to run his hands over the door,
paying the other no mind as they converged several metres behind him. Sirius and Remus watched
the goblin work in silence and Harry used the time to gather himself back together.

Fifteen minutes later, pale and sweaty from magical exertion, Griphook called both Harry and Sirius
forward and had them place their hands on the door. He said a few words in Gobbledygook. As the
clanging of locks unlocking and chains rolling on pegs reached their ears, they removed their hands
from the wood. The noise stopped and the door clicked open. Harry pushed it aside and stepped into
the vault.

“Bollocks.”
Chapter 4

Gold. And not just gold. Galleons, sickles and knuts mounted on infinite piles all around the vault. Jewellery, furniture, art, sculptures, chests, books, old manuscripts, rugs, tapestries and so much more stretched as far as the eye could see. Harry didn't think it possible that so much could be in one place at once. He thought there might be enough money in this lone vault to keep him, his children, his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren and his great-great-grandchildren living a comfortable life without ever having to work.

“This is unbelievable,” he breathed and heard his own words running laps around the room before coming back to him. “Sirius, you have to—” His godfather wasn’t behind him. Through the crack between the door and the wall, he spotted him and Remus standing off to the side, talking.

He’d get on without him, then.

He stumbled down some steps and as soon as his foot touched the main floor, a shimmer of light erupted in a wave of magic that crawled across the ground and scaled the walls until it met at the centre of the ceiling and was absorbed into the stone. A light breeze touched Harry’s face and he imagined it was the very chamber heaving a sigh of relief, as though it had been waiting for his arrival. He lurched back when the walls started to pulse around him, like the room was doing its best to extend its arms at him and take him up in a hug.

“That’s not creepy at all,” muttered Harry, cursing under his breath when he then stubbed his toe on a marble structure that hadn’t been in the way three seconds before. It was shaped like a pedestal; a modest one and nothing at all like the ones Harry had seen the one time he was allowed to go on a school trip to the museum. Resting on top of it was a simple chest along with an envelope propped up in front of it.

The envelope felt light in his hands but he knew that appearances could be deceiving, especially in the magical world, so there was no telling what was really in it. He wrapped his fingers around the paper and opened it in one quick move.

He allowed himself to breathe easier when nothing surprising happened and eagerly tore the rest of the paper away and pulled out two pieces of parchment folded together. His hands smoothed them out and his eyes were immediately drawn to the first words written by a feminine hand.

Our dear Harry,

Harry coughed and willed the tears to stay at bay. He knew that, nestled in his hands, he had the first piece of something linking him to his mother, something that his mother had touched and written just for him maybe while his father looked on over her shoulder. Both their eyes had darted over the same words that Harry would soon read himself.

If you are reading this, then it means that our worst fears have come to pass. I am writing this letter with your father by my side as you sleep peacefully in your room. You had a very tiring day, what with it being your first birthday, and I swear we’ve never seen you smile and laugh so much. It’s with that memory in our minds, and the promise of more to come, that we finally found the strength to put these thoughts into words.

Although it is beyond painful for us to think that you might grow up in a world without us there by your side, it is also our responsibility as your parents to care for you even in our absence. I’d like to think we’ve done everything we can to keep you safe, and your father assures me we have, so I can
only hope to one day be able to set this letter aside and tell you its content myself. But not making it out of this war alive is also a possibility that we’ve come to accept and yet, no power in the universe will ever be strong enough to force us to accept the same for you.

There are some things in this chest that we’ve been putting away this past year to ensure they stay safe, just waiting for you. They’re things your father and I have used in the past. They’ve helped us overcome some of the most difficult times in our lives and if we’re not there for you to help you overcome yours, the least we can leave you with are these mementos.

Our handsome boy, you will thrive and live and love until you cannot possibly believe there is any room left in your life, your heart, to experience any more joy, but trust me, there will be. That’s a hard-earned truth I learned the moment you were born. We want so many things for you, my love. We want you to have the world and we want to watch you explore every crevice, discover every single wonder there is to see.

We want to see you to ride a broom and feel the wind in your hair. We want to be there the first time you get your Hogwarts letter and see which one of us you’re most like: if you faint the way your father or take out a marker and underline the materials you’ll need for the year, like I did. We want to wave to you as you board the train and then wait at home for your letters where you tell us all about your new friends. We want to cry at your graduation and embarrass you in front of all your friends.

And we want to see you to fall in love, to find that special someone that you know will be with you through thick and thin and never leave your side. Someone who pushes you when you need to be pushed and comforts you when you feel let down by the world. Someone who makes your heart race and your palms to sweat. Whose smile means the world to you and who understands you better than anyone else in the world. That’s a love that can take you to the stars and back, much like it did for me and your father.

Lastly, we want you to know that we love you. We love you so much and we are so proud of the person you have grown up to be. You are our greatest accomplishment, Harry and nothing will ever change the fact that we love you with all our hearts. Don’t ever forget that.

Love,

Mum and Dad

Harry carefully placed the letter back inside the envelope. He would make sure to find some place safer for it in the future, but in the meantime the pocket inside his robes would have to do. The chest was another matter altogether. He chanced a look inside and was met with rolls of parchment, some jewellery and several small packages wrapped in yellowing paper.

He decided to leave the chest where it was for now and proceeded to explore the rest of the vault. There we really some extraordinary things in there, things that he’d never seen before and others that he never could’ve imagined would one day be his.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

“What do you think is taking him so long?” asked Sirius. “Should I go in there with him? Maybe I shouldn’t have left him alone, it’s a lot to take in.”

“He’s only been in there for about twenty minutes. You heard what that vault is like and knowing James and Lily like we do, they probably left something for him in there,” reasoned Remus.
“That sound just like something Lily would convince James to do,” muttered Sirius.

“James had no problem thinking of the worst case scenario, but he was so superstitious, remember that? He wore the exact same mismatched socks every single time he played Quidditch after he won that first game.”

“And he would always walk by the common room and bump his shin on the coffee table. Then he’d wait around for a while so he’d arrive late to breakfast because his first match had him so nervous that he couldn’t fall asleep the day before and after he did, he overslept and barely had time to grab some toast,” Sirius chuckled.

“He would’ve taken it as a bad omen, maybe even a jinx, to already prepare for their deaths,” said Remus. “But he loved Lily.”

“She had her head on straight. Had to, to be married to that superstitious nutcase,” Sirius joked, his laugh sweet and strained.

“You ever think...out of our group, they were the ones who deserved to live the most?” If Sirius hadn’t been standing shoulder to shoulder with his friend, he would’ve missed the hushed question.

“All the time,” said Sirius. “They deserved the chance to see their son grow up. Heck, they’d probably know exactly what to do the moment their son started speaking to snakes and taming dragons.”

Remus snorted. “I can see it now, Potter’s Home for Misunderstood Magical Creatures, PHMMC for short.”

“I don’t see what you’re laughing about. You’d be their poster boy.”

Remus paled. “But I don’t look good in any picture. I don’t think I even have a good side.”

“I know! It would be like shooting down five pixies with one spell. Donors would take one look at your long face and trip over themselves dragging their bags of gold,” Sirius grinned. “Do you think that’s what would’ve launched your long-desired modelling career?”

“You’re the same shaggy fleabag you’ve always been, you know that.”

“Nice one coming from a lunar mutt.”

They didn’t bother fighting the grins on their faces and revelled in them until a record worthy snore blew away at the bottom of their robes and served as a reminder of the two dragons dozing on the ground a hundred metres away.

“Do you think they’d be able to forgive me?” asked Sirius.

Remus didn’t need to ask him to specify. “I don’t think they’d see anything to forgive. I sure don’t.”

Sirius scoffed. “I left their child—my godson—alone for his entire childhood because I was too filled with rage and…”

“Heartbreak,” whispered Remus.

“Yeah,” Sirius gulped. “Too filled with things I couldn’t even understand that got me landed in Azkaban and freed their killer at the same time. He was given a First Class Order of Merlin, Moony! First class! While Harry was stuck with those people and you couldn’t even find out where he was.”
“Pads, there’s not a single Time-Turner strong enough to let us go back and change what we did to what we should’ve done,” Remus sighed. “You think I’m any better? All of you were gone, but Harry was still around and I knew that, but I couldn’t—I didn’t know how to keep going and by the time I started to get my head on straight… There was only one way I knew I’d ever get to see him again and when him and his friends took our old compartment on the train, of all places, I realized I’d never make it up to them if I didn’t really start trying.

“He still needs us and we’re both here now, so I say we forget about ourselves and try to make it up to him. If nothing else, we owe him that much. It’s what James and Lily would’ve wanted.”

“I thought you said they wouldn’t think there was anything to make up for,” argued Sirius petulantly.

“That’s what they would say, doesn’t mean I have to agree with them,” Remus shrugged.

“You’re gonna get us haunted if you keep talking like that, Moony,” teased Sirius. “I think I just felt a chill.”

Remus barked out an unexpected laugh and said, “I wouldn’t put it past them.”

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

Harry was enjoying himself immensely. He had already gathered a few books that he thought could turn out to be very useful and was now sorting through dozens of magical trinkets—not unlike those found in Dumbledore’s office—each of a different colour, size, shape and function. He felt overwhelmed yet giddy at being surrounded of his family history, a history which he’d thought had only extended as far as the death of his parents and nothing more.

He had just set down an object that looked like a miniature rounded version of the Eiffel Tower made entirely of metal that let out little puffs of pink and yellow smoke from its base, when something else caught his eye. There, nestled between some velvet cushions on a high-back chair, were a pair of silver hand mirrors that shone under the soft light of the candles scattered around the vault. He pushed aside the cushions and took the mirrors in hand then sat down and made himself comfortable, only surrendering to one solitary coughing fit when a puff of dust rose from the seat and surrounded his head like a swarm of hungry flies.

He studied the mirrors with great care, making sure not to miss a single detail. They were truly magnificent in their simplicity, he thought. They appeared to be made out of pure silver, the back had no decorations but the frame surrounding the glass was engraved with twisting vines and different types of flowers blooming from miniature sized pods.

Harry traced the vines curling around the glass with his fingers until he came across something that didn’t feel right. It had far too many edges and was too small and compact to be a part of the rest of the carvings. He took his fingers off the engraving and squinted his eyes to make sense of what it was. Right at the very top of the frame, written in elegant cursive script, were the words:

_In aeternum_

He skipped his fingers lightly over it one more time then picked up the other mirror from his lap and searched it thoroughly. He skimmed over the same place where the words were etched on its partner and found an additional two words on this mirror as well.

_Et semper_

His fingers traced the inscriptions one last time as he wondered who these mirrors could’ve belonged to. They were old, expensive-looking and quite clearly been made with a very specific purpose in
mind. Harry was more than half certain these two seemingly completely Muggle objects actually held some traces of magic and the feeling he got in his gut when he held them in his hands just supported that fact. With those thoughts in mind, he dropped the mirrors in his pilfered bag (though was it really pilfered if everything in this room technically belonged to him? Even if he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it yet?). He waited for the sound of the mirrors hitting the books already inside but heard nothing. Confused, he opened up the top and peered inside to check himself.

Shocked could not even begin to describe how he felt when he found the sack to be empty. He even turned it upside down but nothing dropped down from it. Now desperate, Harry stuck his hand in the bag and, instead of being met with its fleecy bottom, his arm kept on going in deeper and deeper. The bag was a bottomless pit; it had no ending, just a beginning. Harry felt slightly disappointed in himself, he should've realized that the bag was magical the moment he had dropped the twentieth book inside and had had no difficulty picking it up later on. He swore to himself to be more observant next time then picked up the nearly weightless sack and headed over to the door.

His hand was millimetres away from touching the door when he felt something big and heavy knock him on the back. The impact caused his knees to buckle and he winced as they hit the floor with a clap of bone on rock—he could already feel the pain tomorrow.

He braced himself with his hands on the floor and pushed to a standing position. There was a book lying on the floor close to where he had been before he'd been hit. Harry observed it closely and got his wand out at the ready, just in case. He'd had enough experience with books in the past to know not to trust any inanimate object without knowing exactly what it was first.

He knelt down next to it at a safe distance and did the only thing he knew to do. He poked it with his wand and waited for a reaction. When nothing happened he deemed it safe to touch and pocketed his wand, picking up the book before standing.

The book was very old for sure, and thick. The pages were made out of parchment so it must be a magical book, he decided. The cover was rich in brown leather with a belt that went across it, buckling the book closed. The title of the book might have once been written in brilliant gold but it was so faded by now that Harry could just barely make out the words.

*The Potter Family*

His curiosity peaked, Harry made to open the book and take a look inside but stopped himself before he did. He really wanted to know what was written on those many pieces of parchment, however, he knew it would be stupid to do so without first letting Sirius or Remus check it over themselves. If his second year had taught him anything, it was to never judge a book by it's cover. Not to mention he had a feeling that once he started reading this particular book he wouldn't want to stop until he'd absorbed every single bit of information it had about the family he once had and now knew nothing about.

He picked up the sack from where it had fallen and placed the book inside. He would make sure to have a look at that particular piece of literature some other time, preferably when there weren't two mature, abused dragons sharing a room with his godfather and Remus.

The thick door didn't make a single sound as it shut behind him. Harry wasn't allowed to take five steps before he was accosted by a very twitchy Sirius.

"So how did it go?"

Harry shook his head at his godfather's impatience but answered anyway.
“It went fine. I found some stuff that I think might be useful,” he gestured towards the sack slung over his back, “I also found a letter from my mum and dad.”

He hesitated to say more. It was a private thing, that letter and he didn’t feel too comfortable sharing its contents with anyone just yet, if ever. Would Sirius ask to read his best friends’ last written words? Could Harry really bring himself to deny him such a thing?

“I see.” Harry saw the apple in Sirius’ throat bob up and down as he struggled to swallow. “You all right?”

Harry shrugged helplessly. “I’m okay I guess. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“We get it, you know. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it yet. I’ve heard rumours that it can help to have someone just listen though, we can try it sometime if you want,” Sirius teased lightly.

Harry’s lips twitched in an approximation of a smile and he nodded in silent thanks.

Griphook wasted no time with sentimental proclamations and stared at the three wizards with cold indifference as they jumped on the cart behind him. Harry spared one last look at the entwined dragons on the curled up on the floor and felt a rush of sparks shooting down his limbs from the top of his head as the smaller of the two locked his serpentine eyes with his. Remember your promise, his eyes seemed to say. Harry sent back his own silent message before they were off racing down the tracks at an unreasonable speed.

“Hey, I just remembered something,” Harry picked up his sack and shoved his hand inside. “I found a pair of hand mirrors stashed in there and I think they might be magical. Have you seen them before?”

He stuck his hand inside the bag, thought of what he wanted, and the mirrors instantly appeared in his hand. The mirrors were placed in Sirius’ and Remus’ capable hands and Harry saw something flash across their eyes as they inspected the objects.

“Yeah, I remember these,” —a reminiscent smile touched their faces as Sirius spoke— “James had them specially charmed for him and Lily so that they could communicate when they weren’t together. The mirrors had actually been in his family for a long time before he found them in the vault and he used the same spells we invented in our fourth year the first time we created the original… prototype, I guess you could say. The only ones that used those were your father and I once we got all the kinks worked out. I still have mine but I don’t know what happened to his.”

“You invented spells when you were in fourth year? You would’ve been my age.” Harry hoped his tone of voice matched the incredulity he was feeling at the moment. He’d had many people come up to him and praise his mother for her intelligence and sharp wit, but to hear someone close to both his parents says something similar about his father had not been expected. As the thought entered his mind, he thought he’s perhaps let Severus Snape’s insults and jabs get to him deeper than he’d thought.

Harry shooked his head to rid his mind of Professor Snape. “So, how do they work?”

“We wanted to make it as simple and quick as possible. It hadn’t been our intention from the very beginning but it occurred to us at one point… and by us, I mean your father and Sirius,” —Remus shot his friend a look and Sirius grinned back at him showing a full set of teeth— “that on those very common lonely evenings when we’d be serving separate detentions, the time could be made to pass a lot faster if we could talk to one another without anyone else being the wiser.
“The mirrors serve as two-way communication devices and they have to be keyed in to the owner’s personal magical signature. Those can’t be replicated, so nobody else could use them other than us.” Remus’ passion for their invention shined through every word he uttered and Harry was reminded of what a fantastic teacher he’d been. “All we’d have to do is grab the mirror by the handle to let the magic get a feel of who we are and say the name of the person that has the partner mirror if we want to talk to them. Here, I’ll show you.”

Remus took out his wand and tapped the mirrors several times in a flurry of different motions and foreign spells. He handed them back to Harry and said, “The charms are all in place now. If you hold onto the handle here for a little while, just like that, it’ll start to glow a soon and that means it’s been keyed in to you.” A soft light shone out from the edges where the glass met the metallic frame. “Excellent.”

They came upon a sharp turn in the tracks and Remus thrust the second mirror into Harry’s hands in favour of scrambling for the edges of his seat and holding tight until his fingers turned white. Without the distraction of the marauders’ childhood exploits, the werewolf was at the mercy of his motion sickness once again.

Harry scooted away from Remus and dropped the mirrors into his bag. They could come in very handy if he ever found the opportunity to give the other mirror to someone else, just like his father had done to his mother. He briefly considered giving one of them to Ron or Hermione, but a part of him immediately balked at the thought, though he knew it wasn’t because of lack of trust or friendship.

“Mr Potter,” exclaimed Griphook, “we will be arriving soon. I suggest you hold on tight.”

“All right, thanks for—”

The cart took a sudden plunge into the empty air and Harry felt his stomach get lodged in his throat. It wasn’t hard to push any lingering thoughts to the back of his mind as the cart took a second, deeper plunge into the darkness and all Harry could do was hold on tight and survive the exhilarating ride.

---

Harry made sure to thank Griphook for his assistance when they were finally back inside his office. The goblin had shot him a side-eyed look as though he wasn’t exactly sure what to make of Harry before he bowed his head an inch and showed them to the door.

“One last thing, Mr Potter,” Harry didn’t bother with correcting the goblin on the formality anymore. “Am I correct in stating that you would like me to proceed immediately with the matter regarding the two dragons downstairs? I feel the need to stress upon you that this will undoubtedly cost a mighty fine galleon if it can be done at all.”

“I made a promise, Mr Griphook, and I don’t plan on going back on it now.” Nothing else was said on the subject and the three wizards were soon walking out of the bank with a bag of books and generations of memories to show for their troubles.

“Would you mind if I passed by Eyelops’ and Quality Quidditch before we leave? Hedwig needs some more snacks and I want to see this new broom I’ve read about,” said Harry.

“Alone? I don't know, pup,” Sirius had never been one to play anything on the safe side but then again, he never thought he’d had this much to lose before.
"I swear I won’t take very long and you know there’s not a chance anybody would recognize me looking like this," Harry pressed on.

Sirius ran a hand through his hair then turned to Remus for a much needed second opinion. Remus thought for a second before answering.

“I don’t see much harm in letting you go alone for a few minutes,” Harry’s relief was short-lived. “However, I do think it would put both our minds at ease if we taught you how to get a message to us just in case.”

Harry readily agreed.

“It’ll be easier for you than most since you already know the Patronus Charm,” said Remus. “This is a variation of that spell which allows your Patronus to relay whatever message you wish to whoever you want without running the risk of interference from a third party. The incantation is *Expecto Nuntius*. Your Patronus will appear just as it normally does with the usual spell, only it won’t be able to protect you—its only function is to hear and deliver what you tell it to. Clear?”

“So it’s just like doing a normal Patronus only with an extra word at the end, right?”

“Essentially, yes.”

The little bell above the door announced Harry's arrival in the magical pet shop. He wasted no time in wandering around and simply went over to the owl section and grabbed the biggest bag of treats he could find. He didn't think he would be able to come back here any time soon so he made sure to grab enough to last Hedwig for a while. He quickly paid for his purchase and exited the quaint little shop. Time was of the essence during this excursion and Harry knew exactly where he wanted to spend his scant few moments of anonymity.

It was as he was admiring a new broom that he felt a presence next to him. He chanced a glance out of the corner of his eye and was surprised to see none other than Ginny Weasley ogling the broom along with him. He hadn't known that she was interested in Quidditch until she'd written that letter to him a few days ago but then again, he barely knew anything about the girl.

“Hi.” He was embarrassed to admit that that was the absolute best that he could come up with.

“Hello.” She barely looked at him before turning her attention back to the broom in front of them.

“Nice summer so far?”

“Uhm, it's been okay I guess,” she said and took a step closer to the display case.

“Fred and George aren’t bothering you too much, right? I know they get a bit antsy during the holidays.” He smiled at her to put her at ease but, if anything, it just made her more on edge than before.

“Yeah, no, they’ve been okay so far.”

“Good, that’s good.” Harry desperately searched for something else to say. “I didn't know you liked Quidditch. Maybe I could show you some of my moves sometime if you’d like.”

“Excuse me!” she snapped her head towards him and levelled him with an impressive glare. “You’d like to show me some moves on your broom? Just who the heck do you think you are! I don't even know you and you’re talking to me like we’re old friends. Is this a… a *thing* you do with girls? What the hell is wrong with you?”
Before he knew it, he had a face full of angry Weasley. She’d slowly backed him into a corner during her rant and though he was a good head taller than her, he couldn’t control the urge to shrink into the wall as she pinned him with her blazing eyes like a pin to a butterfly. He’d forgotten about the charms that had been placed on him to mask who he was so it was no wonder she hadn’t recognized him. He blushed to the tips of his ears. He hadn't meant for it to sound like *that.*

She’d turned on her heel and was already halfway to the door when he thought to react. He surged forward and grabbed onto her hand.

“Wait, listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—it’s not what you think, I swear…”

She snatched back her hand and hissed, “Save it.”

Later on, he’d swear up and down that the only thing on his mind at the moment had been to get Ginny to listen to him and he hadn’t really stopped to consider how he would go about accomplishing that until he’d watched his arms shoot out and grab her from behind.

He covered her mouth with his hand, put an arm around her to restrain her own between their bodies and led her, literally kicking and screaming, away from the front of the store and through a door at the back. The second the door locked behind them he let her go and took out his wand to undo all the charms on his face. He didn’t know what he was expecting out of her when he faced her as himself but it wasn’t having a wand pointed at his eye. Her eyebrows jumped to her hairline when she saw his face but to her credit, her arm never wavered.

“Ginny, wait! It's me. Harry.” A red spark dropped from the tip of her wand, singing his shirt. “Potter,” he added dumbly.

“How do I know it's really you? I'm pretty sure the real Harry wouldn't go around Diagon Alley snatching girls and locking them in storage rooms.”

His cheeks flared to life again but he had the presence of mind to meet her eyes.

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s really me.” She didn’t look impressed so Harry did the one thing he hadn’t wanted to do. “I remember thinking your hands were so cold that you were already gone and I was too late to save you. You were so pale, too. You looked like a ghost and I was almost certain Tom had won. But I wasn’t sure and if there was a chance… just a small one, that you could be saved…” He felt the cold claws of terror squeeze around his neck until he felt like it was a chore just to breathe. “Fighting that basilisk was nothing compared to how I felt when I thought you were gone.”

He looked up from studying his shoes to see that Ginny had lost all colour. Her arm hung limply at her side and she shook from head to toe. From the haze covering her eyes he knew she was back there, in the Chamber, fighting for her life in a battle of wills with the greatest Dark wizard of the age.

Harry didn’t resist the urge to take her in his arms and was surprised when she went willingly. She didn’t return his embrace, but he felt her sink into him and had to brace his legs to hold both their weights.

“I never expected to hear you talk about what happened that day,” she whispered into his shirt. “You never mentioned it so I thought…”

“That I didn't care,” he finished for her. He couldn't blame her. He'd been an idiot and he knew it. “I do care. I swear I did and I still do, I was just—I'm so sorry.”
It was Mrs Weasley’s increasingly frantic calls for Ginny slipping under the door which prompted them to pull away from each other. Harry watched as Ginny slipped a finger under her eyes and subtly wiped away tears that he hadn’t even realized had fallen. Her eyes flitted up to meet his and they regarded each other for some time, each of them lost in the same thought that played like a broken record in their heads: how is it that they could bring themselves to feel so comfortable in the arms of someone they barely knew?

The answer to them, of course, would always circle back to the Chamber. Those few hours fighting the memory of a monster had left them sporting wounds which ran much deeper than those decorating their skin. They’d been left with marks, identical blotches of darkness in their souls which called out to each other in recognition and remembrance whenever they were together.

Harry thought that perhaps in each other they’d found someone who understood, someone who accepted the changes that they’d gone through because they had experienced the very same thing themselves. A connection like that was hard to ignore.

She broke the silence first.

“I have to go.”

“Right, yeah. I’m sorry about earlier, by the way. I didn’t mean anything by it and I definitely wasn’t—I mean it wasn’t my intention to, you know.” He turned around in time to see her muffling a smile behind her hand.

“I know that now. For Merlin’s sake, it’s you, Harry. Anyone else and I’d have trouble believing them, but you, I get,” she grinned.

Harry gripped the hair at the base of his neck and huffed out a laugh.

“Thanks, I guess,” he said.

“Any time.”

With nothing else left to say and Mrs Weasley’s cries getting louder by the second, Harry shuffled along the wall to make room for Ginny to open the door. She was halfway out before he stopped her with a hand on her elbow and had her facing him.

“Wait, here.” Harry dropped his bag to the ground and bent over to reach inside. “Take this with you.”

“What?” She stared open-mouthed at the hand-mirror he’d pushed into her hands. “I really hope this isn’t your way of telling me I need to use a mirror more often.” Her tone was playful with a hint of trepidation, as though she were gearing herself up for disappointment.

“Merlin, no! I can’t seem to do anything right with you, I swear… This is one half of a pair of mirrors that belong to my family. My dad and his friends charmed them so they could use them to communicate with each other when they weren’t together.”

“I can’t take this, Harry. It belongs to your family and it looks really old and expensive and I just really don’t think—”

“Don’t worry about it, all right? I trust you to take care of it properly, Ginny, and if anything does happen to it, I’m sure there’s about a dozen more pairs like these in the Potter vault.” He paused for a
moment before letting out the next part. “We’re not exactly the best of friends yet, but I wasn’t lying when I said I’d like to get to you better. I owe you that at least, but that’s not why I’m doing this either,” he hurried to add when he saw her about to protest.

“I don’t know…” She took her bottom lip into her mouth as she trailed off speculatively. Harry could sense he was only a few sentences away from convincing her to take the gift, so he soldiered on.

“It’s not like I can send out letters to anyone anymore. I don’t want anything to happen to Hedwig or Sirius, if someone recognizes her when they’re looking for me. At least this way I’ll have someone to keep me company.”

She regarded him with narrowed eyes and said, “Don’t think I don’t realize what you’re doing here, Potter. I practically invented guilt-tripping others to get my way.”

“Is it working, then?” Harry had to suppress the urge to grin when he saw her visibly clench her jaw to keep back a smile.

“Damn you,” she said with no real heat in her words.

After that it was a simple case of Harry rapidly explaining the workings of the mirror and staying by her side long enough to make sure she was keyed in to the mirror without any trouble.

“You should go now, before your mother turns the place upside down and inside out looking for you.”

“Right, because you weren’t the one keeping me in here in the first place.”

Ginny grinned at him, pocketed the mirror and carefully opened the door. She popped her head out, straightened her clothes and then, not sparing him another glance, she left.

Harry waited ten minutes before following her out of the room. He’d turned up the hood on his jacket to cover his hair as he strode through the shop, onto the street and up to Gringotts where he could see his godfather and Remus trying to be inconspicuous as they scanned the street for him. Harry almost grinned when they finally caught sight of him, unglamoured and walking down a crowded street, and the thought that this would soon be the least of their surprises officially had his grin breaking to the surface.
Hello! So I'm thinking that depending on the response I get here, I'll either continue or stop posting the next chapters to this story. I have quite a few of them written (and already posted in fanfiction.net) but the story is not finished by far so if you guys are still interested, I'll continue posting here.

“Forty-eight. Again!”

Harry felt his arms strain against the weight of his body and barely managed to bring his chin above the bar.

“You call that a pull-up? AGAIN! Two more.”

Harry breathed in through his nose. Out through his mouth. He tried again. This time, he pulled himself up to his collarbone before almost dropping to the floor and doing another one. He landed on the mat with a heavy thud and felt pain in muscles that he didn't even know he had. His legs quivered as he stumbled to a bench and downed the glass of water waiting for him.

“See? That wasn't so bad now, was it?” Sirius pushed away from the wall he’d been leaning against and approached his godson with a jovial skip in his step. He had an indulgent smile on his face and his eyes were brimming with humour.

“I hate you,” gasped Harry. He’d slipped down to the floor and was lying down on his back with his arms lying limply at his sides. He couldn't find the willpower to move a single muscle. Even breathing was proving to be a difficulty. His ribs ached with each breath that he forced into his lungs and he could feel his abdominal muscles cramping something fierce.

After two weeks of suffering through the same gruelling training sessions almost twice a day, Harry would’ve thought he’d develop a higher tolerance for pain by this point. He ran every morning as soon as the sun came up, then spent the rest of the morning training his body under his godfather’s watchful eyes, and the rest of the day was split between being cooped up inside the library doing research for his new tutor or sweating at the gym that Remus had put together after a few trips into muggle London.

The equipment Remus had bought was similar to the one that Harry had glimpsed in one of the many TV shows that his cousin had favoured watching and he’d had a hard time figuring out how each one worked, but with the help of the other two men in the house, they’d finally managed to figure out what all the colourful knobs and switches were for. He remembered those first few days with a condescending fondness now. How little Harry from two weeks ago had known about what was in store for him.

A sudden screeching and scratching coming from the other side of the door broke his dreary train of thought and Sirius waved his wand automatically in its general direction. A white blur came flying into the room, settling itself on the floor above Harry's head. Harry opened one of his eyes.

“Hedwig,” he murmured, “What have you got there, girl? Is it something special for me?”
Hedwig bent her head over his and nipped at his ear in an affectionate manner. She hopped around his head a few times before settling down and holding out her leg to him. Clasped in one of her claws was the twin to the mirror that he had given Ginny and it was vibrating madly.

“You're such a smart owl, Hedwig. Thank you so much.”

Hedwig put her head down shyly and covered it with one of her wings, obviously pleased by Harry’s compliment. He wondered if she’d be blushing if she were human.

“Sirius, I gotta go. Tell Alice I'll make it to class as soon as I can.”

Harry was already out the door and running up the stairs to his bedroom before his godfather had a chance at protesting. Sirius shook his head in amusement but it faded slightly when he realized what he’d been charged with.

Alice was one of the tutors he had hired for Harry during the summer. She was a petite, thirty-something year old woman with striking blue eyes and curly black hair that she kept tied up tight in a bun at the back of her neck. She wore simple, yet professional, clothes and her overall strict and firm demeanour was what kept Harry from even thinking about slacking in his studies.

She specialized in Occlumency and its counterpart Legilimency. She had come very well recommended by her previous students, both for her innate talents and her discretion. She was highly regarded by her colleagues and was one of the top practitioners in her field of expertise.

The woman was a force to be reckoned with. She already had a pretty poor opinion of Sirius after having caught him in his bathrobe at five in the afternoon with a half empty bottle of Old Ogden’s finest firewhisky in hand at their first meeting. If looks could kill then he would’ve dropped dead to the floor the minute she laid eyes on him, Old Ogden tumbling down the stairs after him.

Needless to say, Miss Alice Hansford did not think very highly of Sirius Orion Black and he was sure his status as a wanted felon didn’t help their situation in the least. She’d yet to say a word about it though and had merely raised an imperious eyebrow when she’d recognized him.

With Harry, on the other hand, she had formed quite a close bond and seemed to be more than willing to endure Sirius’ presence if it meant that she could continue teaching and helping the young wizard.

As he thought of the uncomfortable conversation ahead of him, Sirius entertained the thought of leaving a well-worded note on the front door and have Ms Hansford draw her own conclusions by herself—far out of reach of Sirius’ delicate person.

Sirius snorted and shook his head at himself. He let himself out of the makeshift gym and walked down to the sitting room where he would remain, waiting for Ms Hansford’s arrival and plotting his best approach. He just hoped she’d leave something for Remus and Harry to bury after she was done with him.

Alice Hansford was not a stupid woman by any means, nor was she naïve.

Working the job she did and dealing with the people who were interested in learning the intricacies of her field almost ensured that she would have to deal with some pretty big fish in the wizarding world. And she had to know how to deal with them without upsetting the waters because just one tiny misstep and she’d have a price on her head in less than an hour.
If she wasn’t already dead by then.

It was simple mathematics, really. Wizards who wanted to learn how to conceal their thoughts from others were people who obviously had something very important to hide. Something big that would do them no good were it come to light and would result in a world of hurt for her if she let anything slip—intentional or not.

To do her job well, she first had to peek into the minds of her students herself so as to help them construct their defences against Legilimens or reinforce whatever measures they already had. She had to test their barriers, to push where they needed pushing and to look for any weak links in their armour, allowing them the chance to cover those cracks and make their minds that much harder to penetrate.

By looking into her students’ minds she got far more information than they wanted her to have and it became a game of cat and mouse. Regular witches and wizards didn’t needed to worry about sudden attacks to their minds—it was politicians, aurors, powerful heads of Houses, personal assistants and department heads that came to her for help. She’d learned pretty early on in her profession never to ask too many questions and to never show any reaction to the things that she might see inside those people’s minds.

Some of the things that those witches and wizards had done or witnessed were so horrifying that if it weren’t for the help of her own impenetrable mind barriers she’d most definitely be plagued by nightmares each night. A few hours in front of an honourable judge and she could have half the Ministry of Magic in Azkaban facing life sentences.

Hence her need to learn and dominate the art of discretion. She had a contract drawn up for every client that prevented per their demands but she would’ve been a fool not to make sure to add a little something in the fine print in case of emergencies. To this point, she’d never had to use it but that didn’t mean she hadn’t come frighteningly close.

No, Alice Hansford was definitely not a stupid woman. However, not much of her previous experience could’ve prepared her for what she had seen inside the famous Harry Potter's mind.

She hadn’t known much about the boy before meeting him, mostly what she heard from rumours or read in books about his defeat of the Dark Lord. She made it a habit to take everything she read with a healthy pinch of salt and that could be said doubly so for the famous Boy-Who-Lived. After all, there had only been two people present when Voldemort cast the Killing Curse and she was certain Harry hadn’t done any interviews recently, she had to wonder just from where all these authors and researchers got their facts and figures.

The things that had been done to that boy, the feats that he had been put through, they were enough to drive any grown wizard to the brink of desperation. Not only had he faced against Voldemort three times in his thirteen years of life, he had also been abused within the walls of his supposed home. Yet, despite everything, Harry had somehow managed to grow up into a kind, brave, loving and compassionate young man that she had the pleasure of getting to know.

The burden that had been placed on Harry’s shoulders was unlike any that she had seen before and Alice was not ashamed to say that she had been completely won over by him. She had broken one of the first rules she’d set for herself: never get too close. But she couldn’t walk away from this. She figured even someone like her, a mere passerby in the life of Harry Potter, had a role to play in what was to come and she wouldn’t give up now, not when she’d barely even had a chance to get started.
It was an extremely tired Harry that joined Sirius and Remus for dinner that evening. He had been put through hell with Alice after he had shown up fifteen minutes late. She had been unhappy with him to say the least, pushing him to work twice as hard during their three hour session to serve both as punishment and warning. She had performed legilimency on him and had pushed her way into his mind, just for a second, to show her displeasure and to prove a point—he couldn't afford to lose any precious time. He was nowhere near ready to withstand a full on attack on his mind if it came to it and Alice had made that inescapably clear to him.

Harry had received the message loud and clear and seeing as how it had already been weeks since the start of their lessons and he’d made the slightest of progress, Alice had introduced him to a slightly different approach. Instead of building mental walls like the majority of Legilmens and Occlumens would suggest, he would build something else. A labyrinth. It would take lots of time and effort on Harry's part, including meditating three times a day instead of just once, but he had hope it would pan out in the end. If Alice’s example had taught him one thing it was that it had been far too easy for her to decimate his defences and look into his thoughts. He wouldn’t stand a chance against Voldemort at this rate.

“—what do you think?”

Harry looked up from his bowl of soup, his head hundreds of miles away.

“What?”


“No. No, I'm fine. Just thinking about some things,” he mumbled into his spoon.

“Harry, you can tell us if anything is bothering you, you know that,” Sirius said gently. “So come on, out with it. Tell us what's been bothering you”.

Harry sighed and let go of his spoon, dropping any pretences of actually eating. “Alright, you know how I told you that I’d already sent Ginny Weasley a letter saying that you guys were going to rescue me from the Dursleys?”

“Weasley, Weasley…? Oh! You mean the girl with the head of fire? The girl that you entrusted this big, important secret to? The same one you ran into in Diagon Alley? Your mate's sister?” teased Sirius. “Vaguely.”

Harry decided to ignore his teasing for the moment and said, “Right, well, I think we can trust her with a bit more than just me being here.”

“I don’t understand,” said Remus. “What more do you want to tell her?”

“I think we could really use her input with some things,” Harry began hesitatingly. “She doesn’t need to know where I am exactly or even what we’re doing but with the prophecy… Voldemort’s coming back and I need to know how to beat him. And for that, I need to know what he’s like, how he thinks.”

“You think she can help with that?” Remus’ tone left no room to misinterpret his scepticism. “She’s just a girl. We don’t even know her that well. I can recall she was a gifted student, probably one of the best in the class, if a little bit of a quiet person, but that doesn’t mean she could help us with this. It's Voldemort, Harry.”

“You don't understand,” Harry took off his glasses and massaged his temples. “She's not just any
girl, Remus. She could really help us out here. She knows things about him that no one else does.”

Sirius and Remus shared an incredulous look with each other. What they were thinking was clearly painted on their faces: How could a twelve year old girl know more about the Dark Lord than anyone else in the world? Sirius was the one who voiced that question out loud.

“You don’t know?” Harry had never even considered that they didn’t know about what happened his second year. Remus had been a teacher at Hogwarts, after all.

“Know what?”

Harry guessed that it was possible that Dumbledore had somehow managed to keep the more alarming parts under wraps. How he managed it though, what with four students, a ghost and a cat having been petrified on school grounds, he’d never know.

Harry told them about the diary and Tom Riddle’s memory. He explained to them how Riddle had tried to come back to life by sucking the life force out of Ginny after he’d been possessing her for months to do his cruel bidding. It wasn’t his favourite story to tell, so he kept it short.

“I see,” said Sirius, “And this Tom Riddle, he was a Death Eater?”

“We would’ve known about him if he’d been in the Inner Circle,” refuted Remus.

Harry smiled wryly and pulled out his wand from his pocket.

“It's easier if I just show you.” He used his wand to write the name Tom Marvolo Riddle in fiery letters in mid-air, just as Tom himself had done in the chamber a year ago. A flick of his wrist and the letters rearranged themselves.

He hadn’t taken his eyes off the two men in the room which meant he had a front row seat to watch as the colour swiftly drained from their faces to be replaced by a sickly white.

Remus blindly stuck out a hand to steady himself even though he was still sitting down. Sirius' eyes had reached an almost comical size, nearly popping out of their sockets, while his lips were pursed in a straight line.

“We never… uhm… we never even knew his real name,” Sirius stuttered. “It didn’t seem that important when we were trying to find out where he was hiding himself and who he was going to send his Death Eaters after next. Whatever spies we had, they had to focus on finding out what he was up to and I think even his first supporters eventually forgot he’d ever been anyone other than him.”

“You’re saying he’s been back for a year now?” pressed Remus.

“He didn’t manage to come back completely and I think he wasn't actually there even, not in the physical sense. Not really. But he was trying to be. I'm not explaining this right. Dumbledore said it was just a memory. Tom Riddle—Voldemort—left some part of himself in his diary when he was a student in case he ever needed it. I guess it was sort of a backup plan, in case something went wrong.”

“And Dumbledore knew,” Sirius spat bitterly. “He’s known this whole time who that evil prick was. He must’ve. Bloody fucking Merlin, Moony! That bastard went to Hogwarts! He was a student at our school and we never even…”

Words seemed to have failed Sirius for he let his sentence trail off into stunned silence as he stared
sullenly at the wall.

“This is—it’s too late now to know for sure whether knowing would’ve helped us in any way—”

“Lay off it, Moony and don’t even try,” Sirius’ harsh tones cut straight through Remus’ uncomfortable mutterings. “This is just another one of Dumbledore’s many secrets that we’ve somehow managed to stumble on and I am sure there will be many more to come. We will never know if it could’ve made a difference ‘cause we weren’t even given the chance to find out.”

The declaration left behind an uneasy silence. Thinking about the hundreds of different outcomes that could’ve come about had Dumbledore shared some of his secrets with the rest of the world brought a sour taste to Harry’s mouth.

“Out of everyone,” Harry began, voice low so as not to disturb the stillness in the room, “I think she deserves a chance to fight back.”

Harry thought back to his brief encounter with Ginny at the shop. He remembered the stricken look on her face, the tears running down her cheeks at the very mention of her possession.

“I think she needs it.”

Sirius studied his godson for a moment. The boy was not even fourteen and he had that look in his eyes. It was an impression, a ghostly glimmer left behind in the aftermath of a trauma. It saddened him. Sirius imagined the Weasley girl’s eyes to look similar, if not the same.

God, they’re only children.

“If she feels all right talking about this with you, then I don’t see a problem,” Remus said slowly, thinking over the words as he spoke them. “She’s had him in her head. Whatever information she could give us would obviously be very welcome.”

“But only if it’s what she wants,” added Sirius. “I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t ever want to talk about it and if that’s the case, we’ll respect that, yes?”

“Of course, what do you take me for?” It came out sharper than Harry had intended, but he couldn’t help feeling insulted that Sirius thought he’d push Ginny into talking after what she’d been through.

“I’m just saying, pup. It’s a complicated situation that could easily get out of hand. Just be careful.”

Harry bit his lip and only succeeded in keeping back his sharp reply because he knew Sirius was right.

Between defending his ego and protecting Ginny, it was no contest. He picked Ginny.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

It was not often that someone managed to take Albus Dumbledore by surprise. The Headmaster of Hogwarts had a good few years under his belt and considered himself to have seen quite a lot of things over the decades. He’d fought battles, killed men, fallen in love, travelled all over the world, gained new friends, lost old ones and had expanded his knowledge further than he could’ve ever hoped for. So, naturally it was only logical for him to assume that it would be quite a while before anything new surprised him anymore. That is, until Harry James Potter was born.

It was from that day moving forward that he found himself continuously surprised, sometimes even astounded, by the things that young Harry managed to accomplish and the scrapes that he got himself
into and then somehow managed to get out of, though not completely unscathed. He’d soon had to employ copious measures of subterfuge in order to keep an eye on the boy and his penchant for attracting trouble wherever he went.

Albus had thought him to be cursed, at first. He had attributed Harry’s brushes with death to a final act of desperation on Voldemort’s behalf as he’d seen Death’s hands reach for him at Godric’s Hollow. It didn’t take him long to figure out there was nothing magically wrong with Harry Potter, but it didn’t ease his concern one bit.

As he’d reflected to himself many times over the years, it was not until Harry Potter entered his life that he found himself encountering sudden situations that took him completely by surprise. And this was just another one of them.

Not too long ago a brown feathered owl had flown in through his office window and landed on one of the many piles of parchment that littered his desk. The little owl had seemed rather impatient, hopping from one pile to another, flying across the room and landing on an ancient Greek balance only to then grow bored of its new resting place and going in search of another one, choosing the perch of one very independent and territorial phoenix. Not liking the presence of this uninvited companion, Fawkes proceeded to head-butt the owl off his perch and watch in what could only be deep satisfaction and amusement as the owl fell and landed on the carpeted floor, a mess of feathers and indignant chirps.

“Now now, Fawkes, No need to be so rude to our excitable new visitor.” Dumbledore’s gentle chastisement was somewhat rendered ineffective by the laughter coating his voice.

He heaved himself off his plush armchair and bent down to pick up the small owl, setting him on his desk lightly. He carefully tidied up the owl's feathers and offered him a little bit of water from Fawkes' bowl, an action on which his phoenix made his feelings very clear as he flew off to the opposite side of the room and turned his back on Dumbledore, stubbornly refusing to so much as look at him.

Dumbledore shook his head at his old friend then turned his attention back to the messenger owl.

“So tell me then, what have you brought for me on this fine morning?”

The owl stuck out his leg and looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to take the letter tied to it. Dumbledore did so nimbly and no sooner did he have the letter in his hands than the owl flew off, out the window, soaring back to his home in the post office where he knew warm food would be waiting along with a much needed nap.

Dumbledore inspected the letter in his hands and took out his wand, performing the necessary detection spells just in case. It wouldn't be the first time that someone tried to slip something past the old headmaster in the form of ordinary mail. When no red flags showed up in any of his inspections, Dumbledore relaxed and took out a simple letter opener from his top desk drawer. It sliced through the paper easily and gave way to show a simple piece of stationery parchment folded in half. He unfolded it and sat down to read it at his desk.

Once finished, he hurriedly searched inside his robes for his spectacles and placed them on to read the letter again. Then again. And again. And again. He hoped that by the sixth time it would make sense to him but he wasn’t having much luck in that department.

This wasn’t meant to be happening. It wasn’t the plan.

Dumbledore made a calculated decision and stood up from his comfy chair to stride over to the other
side of his office where a small winding staircase was located. He had a few ways of verifying whether or not the claims that his correspondent was stating were true and one of the most accurate methods to verify them was located right above his office inside his vast, private library. Upon reaching said room he took no notice of the hundreds upon hundreds of books, tomes, scrolls and even tablets that were immaculately propped up on bookshelves or fastened securely inside glass cabinets. He paid no mind to the trinkets, baubles and keepsakes that lined the ledges of the windows or the gently swaying model of the solar system that hung from the ceiling of the room, its size and beauty making it an undoubtedly priceless possession.

Instead, he paced over to a small, unremarkable cabinet that was propped up against the wall, its back legs being too short and weak to support its weight. Dumbledore took out a small key from the inside of his robes and used it to open the cabinet door, removing a row of books to reveal the item he’d been looking for.

He sighed in disappointment.

What he had feared was, in fact, true. There was the magical hourglass he'd made nearly fourteen years ago. It was meant to record and show any changes in the blood wards surrounding Number 4, Privet Drive. And it was broken. Shattered. Small fragments of glass were arranged in a circle around the smattering of sand that had previously been inside the hourglass. Smack down in the middle of the organized mess was a small section completely void of any glass or sand.

*It's as if it exploded from the inside out,* he mused to himself.

The question that kept nagging at the back of his mind however, demanded just when this happened. It could've happened at any time in the past few years as he hadn't had the time to check on this particular ward and had been assured by the other monitors in his office that marked the changes in the other, more common, protections surrounding the Dursley household.

*This changes everything.*

Dumbledore wasted no time and put everything back in its place, vanishing the small mess and rushing down to his office. He strode over to the fireplace and took out his wand, muttering a quick, "*Incendio,*” to get the flames going. He then grabbed a pinch of Floo powder from the bag on top of the mantle and whispered a secret address before sticking his head amongst the emerald flames.

Less than five minutes must have passed before he took out his head and stepped away from the fire. He had just sat on his chair when the fire flared an even brighter green than before and a large, limping figure stepped out.

“What is it you want, Albus? I've told you before about contacting me directly. Who knows what type of scum could be listening in!”

The man hobbled forward with the help of a cane held in his right hand. He sat down on the chair facing the Headmaster and looked up at him.

From this new angle it was much easier for Dumbledore to see the toll the years had taken on Alastor Moody. His thin brown hair hung at shoulder length and a big chunk was visibly missing from his nose. Scars covered nearly every surface of skin on his face and as he placed his cane in front of him and rested his hands on top of it, Dumbledore was willing to bet that those scars continued onto the rest of his body if his mangled hand was anything to go by. Of the two brown eyes he should have had, only one remained. His left eye-socket held a blue, magical eye, the contrast of colours already shocking enough but the way in which the eye moved around at random moments and even turned all the way into the back of his head, made it a most frightening sight.
“I understand your concern, Alastor. Let me reassure you that if it weren't for the dire circumstances, I would have taken much more care in contacting you,” said Dumbledore.

“Enough with the niceties, Dumbledore. You know I don’t care for them,” Moody grunted. “What do you want?”

Dumbledore decided not to test his friend's patience any further and go straight to the point.

“Harry Potter has been kidnapped from his muggle home.”

Absolute silence met his declaration. Moody fixed both his eyes on the man sitting in front of him and pierced him with his demanding glare.

“I'm going to need more than that, Albus,” he growled.

Dumbledore proceeded to tell him everything that happened that day.

“We have to find him and bring him back home, Alastor. If he cannot stay at his aunt's house any longer then Hogwarts shall become his new home but he needs to be protected. Remus and Sirius don't know the risk they're taking with that boy's life. We need to find him before it's too late.”

“What do you want me to do, Albus? Should I go look for the boy? Put a bounty on his head for anyone to bring him in alive? Call my contacts with the Aurors? It would cause chaos among the wizarding world if they knew that the Boy-Who-Lived has been kidnapped right from under the Ministry's nose!” Moody grumbled.

“No no, of course not,” denied Dumbledore. “No one knows Harry's missing except for the two of us and we shall keep it that way.”

“Then what do you need me for if not to partake in my wonderful company?” sneered the man.

Dumbledore did not let his friend's attitude get to him as he knew it was not directed at himself. Years and years of fighting against Death Eaters and dark creatures had left Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody with a closed off heart and a hardened exterior.

“I should like you to keep an eye out,” —Moody croaked out a laugh at his choice of words— “and tell me of anything suspicious happens. Call your contacts and gather as much information as you can without letting them know that Harry’s missing. I will do the same and hopefully we'll have a clearer understanding of this whole mess and will find Harry in no time at all.”

Moody disagreed and he wasn’t afraid to make it known.

“I come in here and you say the boy’s been kidnapped, nearly give the blackened stump in my chest a right jolt,” —Moody cackled— “and now you tell me it’s the boy’s godfather who has him? The same one you told me was innocent a couple months ago 'cause you didn’t think he should be executed? Make up your mind, Albus. All this twirling around is bound to get confusing at some point.”

“We both know the type of people that would crawl out of the shadows if they knew Harry has been compromised,” said Dumbledore tersely. “We can’t afford to have the boy out of our sight.”

“Or out of your control.”

Dumbledore didn’t show any outward reaction but Moody still knew he’d managed to push a button and maybe even given him something to think about. Though he knew it wouldn’t last for long.
“Do everything you can to find the boy, Alastor.” Dumbledore rumbled.

Moody got up from his chair with the help of his cane and creaked into a mocking bow.

“Oh, and Alastor?” The man turned slightly to show he was listening. “Term starts on September first as you well know and I expect you to be present at the welcoming feast.” The twinkle was back in Dumbledore’s blue eyes..

Moody only bothered to grunt in acknowledgement and then left, his body swallowed whole by the green fire.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

WARNING: There is going to be a delicate episode involving child abuse at around the middle of this chapter (it's in italics) so if you find you can't read about that kind of thing then you can skip over that part.

She was not sure about what she was about to do. She wasn't even sure if it was going to work or not, if her magic would allow it. Hopefully, it would because she didn’t know what she would do otherwise.

Alice had come to care a great deal about her young charge in a short amount of time. It was strange because she'd never seen the big deal about children. It's not that she didn't like them, she did. She found babies to be adorable and little children were always cute, but she'd never felt anything except a sort of distant, temporary affection towards them coupled with a distinct wave of relief that she didn’t have to deal with them herself. This felt different.

In the weeks that she'd been teaching Harry about Occlumency and its counterpart, Legilimency, she'd developed some real feelings for the young boy. She felt responsible for him, for his well-being —both physical and emotional. Hence why she was so determined to do this.

Straightening her back and holding her chin high, she strode forward and into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. She spotted her target immediately and sat down one of the chairs in front of him.

Sirius had been reading the Daily Prophet with a hot cup of tea in one hand and the newspaper in the other when he felt a presence in the room. He allowed the top of the paper to fall back and was met with Alice’s composed form on the other side. He stopped himself from straightening in his seat like a schoolboy in the headmistress’ office, but just barely.

Trying not to let his apprehension get to him, Sirius cleared his throat and looked up to meet the woman's gaze head on.

“What can I do for you, Ms Hansford?” he enquired.

“Mr Black, I must speak with you of an important matter pertaining your godson, Harry.”

Alice could feel her magic waking up inside of her and responding to her words. They were like bonds, snaking around her throat to cut off her words before she could break her client’s confidence.

“What about Harry? Is he not doing well in class? I thought he was making better progress than before, but I can talk to him—”

“No, his studies are fine. Better than fine, actually, he’s quite a smart lad when he puts his mind to it.” She dropped her eyes and fiddled with her skirt. “This is about something else.”

Sirius waited for more clarification. When it appeared that none was coming, he pressed on.

“Miss Hansford, please, if there is anything going on with Harry then I’d like to know immediately.”
“Mr Black… Sirius. May I call you Sirius?” she asked.

Sirius looked a bit taken aback for a second, but answered, “Yes, of course. Uhm, may I call you Alice then?”

“Naturally,” she muttered distractedly. “Sirius,” she started, “I need you to understand something first. The...situation with Harry is rather a delicate one and I'm afraid I can't tell you much about it.”

Sirius blinked. “All this double talk is starting to worry me. What are you getting at here? What’s this all about?”

“It's not that I don't want to tell you, believe me, I do. My hands are tied and I don’t know how much I can say without...” Alice's voice trailed off and she bit her lip in apparent frustration.

Sirius' patience was starting to wear thin. He was steadily becoming more angry and worried every time the woman in front of him refused him a straight answer. Horrible scenarios involving Harry started flashing through his mind and he had to shake his head in order to make them go away.

“Ms Hansford,” —at the look she gave him he quickly rephrased— “Alice, what exactly is going on with Harry?”

“First, tell me what you know about a wizard's oath, Sirius,” she stipulated.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Please, just humour me.”

Though he was confused, Sirius answered anyway.

“I know that there are many different types of oaths that one can take. It really all depends on the type of punishment you want if the wizard were to break the oath. Some take your magic, others your life and a few just hand out a punishment that can be anything the wizards agreed on before casting the oath.”

“Yes, very good. What you did not mention, however, are the circumstances upon which one would take a magical oath. One of those would be if it were required by the profession you chose, for example becoming a medic or joining the auror forces...” she trailed off once again, waiting for him to catch onto what she was not saying.

“I see.” Sirius leaned back on his chair and dropped the forgotten newspaper on the table. “You're saying that you had to take one of these oaths when you became an Occlumency teacher and now obviously there's some conflict of interest here that prevents you from revealing too much to me about Harry,” he concluded.

Alice nodded her head, “Precisely. In fact, I wasn't even sure I'd be able to bring it up without my magic forcing me to stop immediately. Frankly, I am rather relieved,” she admitted.

“You and me both,” muttered Sirius. “Alright, just tell me as much as you feel comfortable with and if it's not enough then I'll ask some questions and we'll go from there.”

“Yes, that should work,” she agreed. “The reason I’ve been wanting to talk to you for quite some time now is to discuss the matter of Harry's...upbringing,” her mouth pinched at the word, as though she'd just swallowed something foul.

“I understand that he's been brought up in his aunt's house as a part of her Muggle family,” Sirius
said carefully, having caught Alice's reaction.

"Has he ever talked to you about how it was like for him? Growing up with no parents and at his aunt's house with her family?"

Sirius rubbed the back of his neck with one hand and shrugged. "No, he doesn't like talking about it. And I'm guessing I'm about to find out why."

"You are. To help Harry become one with his mind I first had to look through what he's got stored in there, meaning that all his memories and thoughts were fully open and available for my viewing. His childhood was not a happy one. He's had to go through—" here, the words seemed to have died in her throat as they were formed on her lips but no sound came out. She huffed in frustration. "His childhood was not idyllic and that left a mark. I am sure you are aware that his relatives were not very fond of magic."

"Yeah, Lily would often complain about her sister's close-mindedness. They never got along at all after she went to Hogwarts."

"Something you need to know, Sirius, is that with their hatred of anything magical and their wish for a mundane, normal life to suddenly have the object of their displeasure right underneath their roof every day caused quite a bit of…" she licked her lips and finished with, "tension. They never bothered to hide their unhappiness from Harry. In fact, they made a point to make it known. Repeatedly." She emphasized the last two sentences quite clearly.

"No." Sirius jumped from his seat and started pacing the kitchen floor. "No no no no no. You don't know what you're saying, what you saw… I refuse to believe this! Harry? My Harry? No one in their right mind would lay a finger on that boy's head. Anyone with half a working eye can see he's a nice boy. No, you've got it wrong."

Alice knew that this would be a hard topic to discuss with Sirius because of his love for the boy, but she knew it needed to be done. For Harry's sake.

"I know that this may come as a shock to you and that it is not something any one of us would like to even think about," —she took a deep breath and placed a soothing hand on his arm, stopping him in his tracks— "but the fact remains that the past is the past. You can't go back and change it, but in the meantime there is someone here, in the present, who needs some help. Surely you've seen how small he is, even for one his age. He can be quiet, withdrawn, doesn't like to talk about himself and prefers taking care of others to dealing with his own pain. They're not bad qualities, but they're a by-product of something else."

Sirius' shoulders slumped as though the weight of the world had suddenly dropped on top of them. His eyes lost their light and a haunted look entered them, not unlike the one he'd adopted some months into his stay in Azkaban. That had also left its mark on the man. One that he hadn't fully dealt with yet.

"No, it can't be," he whispered. "He's such a great kid. How can something like that—just why?" He whirled around so his back was to her, but even so, Alice could tell from the slope of his shoulders that he was holding back tears. A shaky breath later and Alice was sure he'd lost the fight.

It was confirmed when he turned around and stared at her with red-rimmed, watery eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," she whispered. "But it's true and all you, or any of us, can do now is be there for Harry and help him heal. He needs to deal with what's happened or it will eat him from the inside out." She looked at him pointedly and he knew that comment was directed at him as well.
“I just don't know what to say. What to do.” He looked around the room, wishing for the right answer to pop out of somewhere for him. “I've got to talk to Remus about this,” he concluded, “and then we'll both talk to Harry.”

“I think that's a brilliant idea, Sirius,” she gave the man a small smile before turning and walking to the kitchen door. She hesitated for a moment.

“Perhaps you'd like to look at Harry's medical records. The Muggle ones,” she specified, “it might give you a bit more insight into what I'm talking about.” An unidentifiable look entered her eyes before it was gone in the next second.

“I-I don't know if I'm ready to do that,” Sirius admitted.

“Is anyone ever truly ready for something like this?” she mused. “You just have to take it and deal with it as best as you can. Goodbye, Mr Black.”

She did not expect to get a response as she walked out the door and left. The distant sound of crackling flames alerted Sirius to her departure, but he just stood there in the middle of the Black kitchen. He entertained the thought that he was asleep and the previous conversation had been nothing but the manifestation of his worst fears in excruciating detail.

This was worse than anything that had ever been done to him in Azkaban. And it was just the beginning.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

The sun was burning through his dark hair. His fingers were dirty with mud from the ground, dirt caked underneath his fingernails. His clothes hung limply from his small body, dragging against the grass, picking up dust and letting it fly.

He wished he could be like the tiny dust particles floating around him. He wished he had the power to fly like he sometimes dreamed about.

Little six year old Harry looked down at the grass covered ground and let a small smile light his face. He was happy at that moment. He was sitting outside alone in the backyard. He had two toy soldiers standing in front of him, their feet pushed into the soil so that they could stand upright and fight together against the forces of evil that took the form of an earthworm.

Both soldiers had belonged to his rotund cousin Dudley. It was easy to tell by the missing arm on one soldier and the half broken leg on the other. He'd found them yesterday inside the trash can, his aunt having obviously thrown them out after Dudley had had his fill of them. Harry never got any new toys, or even old toys, so he'd taken a risk and had rescued the two tiny men from their bleak fate and had taken them in. He didn't care that they were disfigured, or that they had belonged to his cousin first. They were good companions, the only ones he's had so far, and he wouldn't give them up just because they were a bit damaged.

He thought back to the dream he'd had the night before as he took the soldiers in his hands and made them walk. It had been the same dream that he always had. About the green light, the scary laugh, the watery, grey eyes and the flying motorcycle. He'd asked his aunt once about the dream. Her only response had been to turn around and slam the cooking pan she'd been holding against his bum.

He'd never asked again.

An idea popped into Harry's head. A dangerous, exciting idea that could get him into heaps of
trouble. He looked around the garden very carefully, keeping his eyes open and his ears alert to anyone or anything that might be close by.

Satisfied that he was completely alone, Harry put down the two figurines and sat on his hands in anticipation. He concentrated on the little men and made his wish. He felt the rush of warmth that spread from his core all the way through his entire body. His eyes closed involuntarily. It was comforting and rare, so he savoured it for as long as he could. When he could hold it in no longer, Harry opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on the soldiers. They started to move.

The one furthest from him, with the missing arm, rolled onto his side and pushed himself up, dusting himself off. He then glanced around and noticed his fallen comrade on the ground a few feet away. He trotted over to his friend and bent down, putting the man's arm around his neck and helping him stand up on his one good leg. They both looked around carefully and started making their way forward, jumping slightly when they noticed the earthworm off to the side and travelling with even more care than before.

Harry let out a small laugh, delighted at the show happening in front of him.

A minuscule gasp caused him to freeze up and shut his eyes close tight. He recognized that gasp.

"Muuuum! Daaaaaad! Harry's doing freaky stuff again!" shouted Dudley as he ran off into the kitchen through the back door.

"WHAT?! Boy! Come in here this instant!" yelled Vernon.

Harry reluctantly stood up. His right hand went to his cheek without his permission, the area still tender from the last time his uncle Vernon had gotten angry at him. He felt tears welling up in his eyes, but wouldn't let them fall. He'd learned the hard way that tears just seemed to make the hits come down harder.

Trudging to the house like a man headed to the gallows, Harry felt the first hints of tremors trickling down his back to his hands. He balled them into fists and kept his head down.

Upon entering the house, he first spotted aunt Petunia at the kitchen, numerous pots and pans held by the fire as she prepared dinner for her family. Nothing inside those pots would ever reach Harry's plate though. If he even got a plate that night; it wouldn't be the first time he got sent to his cupboard without dinner and it wouldn't be the last either.

He spotted his cousin sitting in front of the television, his eyes glued to the thing with a concentration he only saved for cartoons and food.

Before he could go one step further he felt the tell-tale whoosh of air off to his side right before he ducked and a hand came flying by where he had just been. Harry cursed his natural reflexes. Running away from his punishment would just further enrage his uncle and, sure enough, as he turned around and looked up he could see Vernon was towering over him. His moustache was twitching, his eyes were bulging out of their sockets and his entire face was blotched in red, gradually reaching a shade of purple that Harry knew couldn't be healthy. For either one of them, but especially himself.

"Don't you move away from me, boy! What did we tell you about letting your freak side show, huh!?" Vernon stalked towards Harry and grabbed him by his upper arms, squeezing hard enough for the boy to be certain he'd have some rather large bruises tomorrow. "This is our house!! You WILL NOT bring your devil's tricks into our home!"
The man picked up the small boy with little effort and slammed him against the wall. Vernon watched in satisfaction as his head bounced off the plaster and the boy fell to the ground in a lifeless heap. He knew, however, that the boy’s devil magic would start to heal him soon. Already he could see him stirring on the floor and Vernon felt a new wave of fury hit him square in the chest. Clearly, he hadn’t made his message clear enough.

Vernon stomped over to the front door and grabbed the baseball bat they’d placed there in case of a break-in. Hitting the bat against one of his palms, he stalked over to the child lying on the floor and loomed over him.

He swung the weapon at the same time Harry moved his head to look up. Harry knew nothing but pain for the next moments. He waited for the soothing blanket of blackness to swallow him whole and when it did, he greeted it like an old friend, succumbing to unconsciousness and letting his dreams take him to another land far, far away…

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

Hands kept grabbing him. He could feel them pulling and pushing at him, shaking him till his head bounced off whatever he was lying on. He was a prisoner inside his own body. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. Trapped inside his own nightmare as he was, he could do nothing to defend himself.

His throat felt sore and dry. He knew he'd probably been screaming, maybe still was, but could do nothing to stop it.

Slowly, he felt himself gaining back some control. He forced his muscles to relax, allowed himself to be guided down by the hands he now recognized as belonging to Remus. His eyes fluttered open for a second before he hastily closed them again, the light burning through his irises. His glasses were gently placed atop his nose and Harry brought up a hand to adjust them as he sat up. His arms shook like the legs of a baby deer as he used them to bring himself to a sitting position against the headboard of his bed.

Lolling his head to one side and squinting through his sleep fogged eyes, Harry croaked out, “I'm sorry I woke you… And that you had to see that.”

Remus was sitting down on Harry's bed well within touching distance, yet not so close that Harry would feel stifled. Sirius was not far behind his friend, leaning against the bedpost as though it was the only thing keeping him upright. Both men had exhausted looks on their faces.

“Never apologize for something like this, Harry,” said Sirius. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s our job to make sure you’re okay, even if it means waking up in the middle of the night to come check on you.”

“Sirius is right, cub. We can only imagine how difficult this must be for you. Having gone through so much with those awful people in that plastic house—”

“What are you talking about?” Harry interrupted. “Nothing happened. I'm fine. It was just a stupid nightmare.” He shifted uncomfortably on his bed and turned his face away from the two men, neither one of who looked like they were on their way to believing him.

“Harry,” Remus carefully moved towards the teenage boy and reached out a hand to touch his arm, “while you were studying potions yesterday in the basement, Alice had a talk with Sirius. About you.”

Hearing this, Harry’s head swivelled around and he locked a fearful gaze with his godfather. “Sh-she
can't have told you anything. She talked to me, about her oath, and she isn't allowed to say anything. She promised she couldn't."

“She didn't, pup. Not really anyway. What you have to understand is that she's limited to what she can say about you, but she got away with saying enough that I could connect the dots all on my own.”

Harry had tears in his eyes that were threatening to spill out any moment. His breaths were coming in shorter and shorter spurts and he could distinctly hear the blood rushing to his head.

Flashbacks of his first grade teacher having a meeting with the Dursleys sped through his head. He remembered the woman with clarity, being the first person Harry felt he could truly hate almost as equally as he did the Dursleys. He'd confided in her, trusted her with his secret, only to be stabbed in the back not a week later.

*This isn't happening. Not again. Not again.*

He hadn't realized he'd been muttering the last sentence between gasps until he was suddenly enveloped in his godfather's arms.

“Shh, it's okay Harry. Nobody here is going to hurt you for this. It wasn't your fault, all right? It. Wasn't. Your. Fault.” Sirius shared a heartbroken look with his friend as they both watched the young boy break down in his godfather's arms.

Harry began muttering something into Sirius' chest and it took a while for it to register on the men, but when it did, they were quick to reassure him.

“We believe you, Harry. Nothing any one of those Muggles has to say will change what we know is true. We know what you've been put through and we know you haven't healed yet,” said Sirius. “But you're not alone anymore, you have me and you have Moony, here. We would never tell anyone anything without your permission and we won't force you to talk.”

“But we think it would help you if you did,” said Remus. “In any case, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Harry listened to their words and knew they meant them. He began to come back to himself.

“No one’s ever… I mean, once, I told a teacher, but I think she thought I was exaggerating and she... well.”

“There was never any doubt, Harry. What those bastards did to you is unforgivable,” stated Sirius. “If Lily and James were still alive they'd be horrified and enraged beyond anything you could imagine. They were wonderful people, Harry, make no mistake, but once you messed with someone they loved... There’s not a force strong enough in this world that would have kept them from destroying the Dursleys. They would've done anything, anything at all, for the people they loved. They would not have stood for what was done to you, and neither will we.”

Harry nodded numbly. “I don't know what to say.”

So nothing else was said.

The three of them sat in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts as they gained comfort from each other’s presence. Remus found himself contemplating different ways of exacting revenge on the Dursleys for what they’d done to Harry. He wanted to break the chains he usually kept locked tight around the darkness swirling inside him and unleash the beast. Decades of honing his self-
control suddenly seemed meaningless in the face of the pain Harry had been put through.

Sirius, however, found himself comparing his godson's childhood to his own. His parents had not been ones to show affection and they could be downright cruel, but they had never raised their hands to him. A few curses and jinxes here and there, for sure (surprisingly mild punishment for such a dark, pureblood family), but it was the norm in the circles his parents ventured. During his time at Hogwarts he'd heard stories from some of his covert friends in Slytherin; memories of the ways in which their own parents had chosen to discipline their children and Sirius had always been left feeling strangely grateful for his own parents. That feeling only ever lasted a couple of hours.

In the meantime, Harry was trying his best not to think of anything at all. He was still jumpy and shaky from the memories his nightmare had unearthed and was working his best to stuff them back inside the cupboard he kept in the back of his minds—the one he kept fiercely protected and strategically isolated from the rest of his memories.

He knew he had issues to work through. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that his past wouldn’t eventually push through the door to his cupboard—his nightmares were sufficient proof of that. He would deal with his pain in his own way though. Harry didn't want to burden anyone else with his problems, but he had the nagging panic in his chest telling him that this was something Sirius and Remus would like to be burdened with.

He didn’t know what to do with that.

As if reading his thoughts, Remus was the first one to break the silence.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about it at all, but just know that it will help to get all these things off your chest. You can start off small. Just say whatever comes to mind whenever you feel like talking and find one of us to listen. Or anyone you trust, really."

“It’s not a burden for us to be there for you.” For a second, Harry really worried he’d somehow managed to project his thoughts onto Sirius, but his godfather just gave him a knowing look.

“I'll try.”

“Attaboy!” smiled Sirius. “Now get some rest, however much you can, we have some news to tell you about in the morning and you're gonna need a clear head for it.”

Harry felt his apprehension start spreading. “What's wrong? Did something happen?”

“No no, it's nothing bad. We just have some interesting things to share from an unusual source that I managed to dig up and I think you should hear about it,” responded Remus. “Now get some sleep.”

“Well, all right then,” Harry huffed. “Goodnight.”

“Night, pup.”

“Night, Harry.”

-Squeak! Squeak! Thud!

“Hey! Watch it, would you!!”

Tick tick tick! Tick tick tick! Tick tick ti-bump!
“Great. What now? Did you touch something?”

“You know I didn't. Just try putting it like this.”

Tick tick tick! Tick tok tick! Tick tok tick! Tick tok tick!

“It's working!”

Tick tok tick! Tick tok tick! Tick tok tick!

“I don’t know… I don't think it's—”

BOOM!

An explosion unlike any heard before rocked the very foundations of the Weasley home. Though held up by magic, the house still teetered to one side as the walls and floors shook with a violent and decisive force.

The inhabitants sitting at the kitchen and eating their breakfast had to hold onto their plates and cups to stop them from rolling off the table and smashing on the floor. The shocks continued to ravage the residence until, all of a sudden, they stopped altogether. The Weasleys downstairs shared uncertain looks with each other before tentatively letting go of the silverware. The two youngest even resumed eating, but not before their eyes met in silent warning. Ron and Ginny knew better than to say anything when something like this happened in their home, so they tried to make themselves as small a target as possible, waiting for their mother's unforgiving scolding that would no doubt follow.

Arthur Weasley shook his head. He also knew what would happen next and could not believe the courage, or stupidity, that his middle two sons must have in order to brave his wife's wrath. He picked up his newspaper and pretended to read, staying out of whatever was about to happen, but staying alert in case his wife required his assistance. He knew she could deal with those troublemakers all on her own though.

A shaking hand reached into a beige apron and pulled out a wand. Molly Weasley was infuriated with her twin boys. She didn't think she'd be able to hold herself back from cursing those two all the way into next week.

“FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY! YOU COME DOWN HERE RIGHT THIS INSTANT!”

Twin blurs could be entered the kitchen three seconds later. Covered in purple soot and smelling like a wood fire, both twins stood before their mother and cowered under her gaze, looking down at their shoes as though they were suddenly the most interesting things in the world. Mrs Weasley took a deep breath before beginning her assault.

“What were you two thinking? You could’ve been killed! You could’ve brought the house down on all of us and then where would we be? I’ve told you a million times before not to do your crazy experiments anymore, much less without an adult present. But did you listen? Of course you didn’t! Did you use your wands? Should I expect a housecall from the Ministry next? Do you know what that would for you two? You could be expelled from Hogwarts! Just think, that could end up affecting your father’s job!” Mrs Weasley took a deep, cleansing breath and examined her two children.

She could tell that her words had affected them somewhat, but she knew them well enough to realize that this would definitely not be the last time she'd have to give them a skinning for something like this.
“Now, what do you have to say for yourselves?”

Fred and George simultaneously looked up into her eyes and muttered, “We're sorry mum, it won't happen again, we promise.” They both focused back on the floor and cuffed their shoes against the wood.

“You're right it won't happen again. You are both grounded for three weeks straight. You'll help me in the kitchen, you'll de-gnome the garden every day, you'll do extra chores without complaint, you'll feed Errol, you'll do all your homework, no friends will be coming over and neither will you be going to them. Is that understood?”

“But mum—”

“It's not fair—”

“I said,” she interrupted them, “is that understood?” she challenged them with crossed arms and pursed lips to question their punishment again and the wand spitting fiery red sparks warned them of the consequences if they did.

“Understood,” they mumbled.

“Very well then. You're both old enough to cook your own breakfast and once you're finished you'll wash the dishes and clean up whatever mess you've left in your room.” Mrs Weasley sat back down next to her husband, but not before declaring, “And don't even think about trying to use magic or you won't like what I'll do to your brooms.”

Having instilled enough fear into her two sons, she picked up her cup of tea and stored her wand back into her apron. Sighing, she turned to her husband and watched him read the paper. When she started hearing the clanking of pans and dishes, she spoke to him quietly.

“I don't worry about them, Arthur.”

“Don't you know what they're like. With time, everything will work itself out,” Mr Weasley glanced at her over the newspaper and patted her hand reassuringly.

“But what if it doesn't?” She insisted, grabbing his hand and holding onto it for comfort. “None of our other children were ever this troublesome. All three of them, Bill, Charlie and Percy, have their own passions that they put to good use, but all these two seem interested in is pulling the next prank.”

“They're smart young men. You've seen how impressive their test scores have been over the years, despite what they've led everyone else to believe. Whatever they choose to do with their lives later on is their decision and all we can do now is teach them and prepare them as best we can. Just like we did with Bill, Charlie and Percy and just like we’re doing with Ron and Ginny.”

His wife nodded in agreement and admitted, “Yes, you're right, I just worry about them. About all of them.”

“That's why you have me,” he replied, “to share all that worry with and put you at ease.”

Molly smiled and pecked her husband on the lips before standing up and heading off to make sure her children didn't light her kitchen on fire next.

Arthur was left sitting at the dining table and took the chance to observe his two youngest children.
Out of the two of them, Ginny had definitely been the biggest surprise to enter the family. She was the first Weasley female to be born in seven generations and was the seventh child in her family. All markers indicating that she would turn out to be an extraordinary witch.

He studied her more carefully and noticed the signs that told him she was starting to mature. Her body had started changing over the last few weeks of school and over the summer she'd hit the Weasley growth spurt, quickly developing into a beautiful young woman that he knew would be a handful the older and bolder she grew. He sadly came to the conclusion that she wasn't his little girl anymore. And now that he really thought about it, he didn't think he'd been his little girl for quite a while now, probably ever since her first year at Hogwarts.

He closed his eyes at the horrible memories. At the time, he'd chastised himself severely for not noticing the signs of possession in his own daughter, for not paying more attention to the subdued tone of her dwindling letters, especially considering how at odds it had been with her excitement at finally going to Hogwarts. He knew it wasn’t entirely his fault that his daughter had fallen prey to evil, but as her father, it had been his job to protect her and he had failed miserably.

The summer after the Chamber of Secrets nightmare had been tough on the whole family, but especially on Ginny. His two eldest sons had come home from abroad and had offered her their support, willingly sacrificing a shoulder to cry on and two pairs of ears to listen. But she hadn't wanted to talk, which was understandable. She'd kept all the details to herself and only gave up what was necessary, something that he'd only noticed a little while after. It was then that he'd finally accepted just how deeply the traumatising experience had affected his sweet, easygoing, innocent and charming daughter.

She'd been changed. No longer was she a child in need of sheltering from the real world. She'd now experienced the worst parts of the real world and had come out on top despite all the odds, yet bore the scars from her draining battle. Her childhood had ended the moment she'd opened that diary.

While Ginny was years more mature than her actual age, Arthur didn’t think he could say the same thing for Ron.

He was a peculiar one, for sure. Most of the time, Arthur felt like he was the perfect example of those Muggle toys that swung back and forth and bounced up and down on a string—a yo-yo. Arthur had watched his son hop back and forth between maturity and childishness more times than he could count. His adventures with Harry and Hermione were the precise example of this dichotomy.

Arthur knew that his son wasn't stupid, the problem was that he rarely put all his efforts when working on something and so his intelligence was wasted most of the time. His temper certainly did not help in the matter as when someone managed to push his buttons, Ron would lose all restraint and act before thinking. He let his emotions rule him and that, Arthur feared, would one day lead him to make an irreparable mistake.

“Darling, you'll be late for work if you don't leave soon!”

Molly's shout from the kitchen brought Arthur out of his musings. He checked his watch and nearly jumped out of his seat when he saw the time. Scrambling around to gather all his things, Arthur kissed his two children on their heads, yelled a goodbye to his wife and the rest of his brood, and sped off to work with thoughts of eklectricity, toasters and rubber ducks already absorbing his focus.
Chapter 7

The mood the next morning at the Black household was a rather subdued one. Events from the night before were still fresh in most of their minds, despite their efforts to dream and forget. Or, in the cases of the two fully grown men, drink and forget.

Nursing the mother of all hangovers whilst waiting for their charge to come downstairs and their lifesaving potion to finish brewing, Sirius and Remus were slumped on the kitchen table. They rested their elbows on the wooden surface and held their heads in their hands, trying to mentally negotiate with the room to have it stop spinning and force the black spots in their vision to disappear.

The sharp chime of a timer prompted them to let out agonized groans and clutch their heads even tighter. Slowly, Remus shakily stood up from his chair and shuffled over to the stove. He glanced inside the pot that was cooking on the fire and turned off the flames, grabbing two glasses from a nearby cupboard and filling both of them to the brim with the green-yellowish concoction he'd been making since their fifth year.

He handed one of the glasses over to Sirius and kept the other one for himself. He'd wonder later on about what it was inside the hangover potion that made it feel cold and lumpy in spite of being brought to boiling point over a fire, but right now all he could focus on was forcing down the brew.

They picked up the glasses and chugged the contents at the same time, each taking a sick amount of comfort from the fact that they were suffering just as much as each other.

The door to the kitchen creaked open and in stumbled Harry. His glasses were askew, his hair stood up on end more than usual and his clothes were rumpled and slept in. He mumbled a good morning and settled down on a chair. As soon as he did so, a decrepit old house-elf popped into existence in front of the stove and started cooking breakfast for his young master.

Unlike the elves at Hogwarts who were all well dressed and eager to offer their help, this house-elf was the complete opposite. His sole purpose since the moment he'd been born was to serve the members of the highly esteemed Black family. He'd been doing his job for decades and had remained loyal to his masters every step of the way, going so far as to follow their orders even after their demise. However, now that the Black family home was once again being inhabited by actual people and not just animated portraits, Kreacher strained his memory to think of a moment, a single instant, when he'd committed such a horrible transgression that earned him the punishment of being under the care of the worst Black heir to be born since the disappointment that was Andromeda Black.

Kreacher could clearly remember the grief that traitorous, mudblood lover had put his masters through. A Black going into Gryffindor? A family that had been solely dedicated to the Dark Arts, had fought alongside Grindelwald in his struggle to instil pure-blood supremacy in the magical world and had been placed in Slytherin for as long as the records could date back, had spawned an impulsive, foolish child that belonged in the house of the lions? Truly, it had been a most humiliating, not to mention enraging, situation that the Black family had found itself in.

And now Kreacher was supposed to serve the deceiving scum that dared call himself a Black? His worst nightmare had come to life and he could do nothing to change it. His magic wouldn't be bound to Sirius and his loyalty to the family itself wouldn't permit him to stray from his duties. He was stuck in his own personal hell.

“Filthy half-blood thinks he can order Kreacher around because he is the traitor's godson… He'll
learn soon enough. They'll all get what they deserve eventually...” The spiteful mutterings of the house-elf were met with silence from the wizards in the kitchen.

Once everyone had received their portion of breakfast and the alcohol induced headaches had been brought down to a minimum, Remus spoke.

“Harry,” he began, “we don’t expect you to talk about what happened last night and if you want to keep it to yourself for now, then that’s fine. We said we weren’t going to force you and we plan on keeping that promise, all right?”

Harry didn’t take his eyes away from the plate in front of him as he moved his head in form of a nod, not taking the chance to try forming words.

“Yesterday we told you we had some news to share, remember?” Sirius asked, though he didn’t wait for a response before continuing. “We’ve been in contact with some people recently—since before you arrived. They’re contacts from before the war, witches and wizards who fought with us against Voldemort and who would never be caught dead defecting to his side for any number of gruesome reasons.

“For my part, I’ve been trying to find a place for us to stay. It’s no secret I don’t particularly enjoy being back in this house and I’m sure we could all appreciate a change of scenery. Less haunted house from the Victorian era and more pleasant place to live.”

Involuntarily, Harry felt the edges of his mouth quirk up. Sirius paused to send him a playful wink.

“Point is, it’s going to take some time. I’ll get there eventually, but if we want this to work then everything has to be done off the books and while there’s no shortage of people willing to go down that route, we still have to be careful. It’ll take a while before anything is settled.”

“Me, on the other hand, I’ve been having a bit more luck,” said Remus. “I’ve been looking into Voldemort. Now that we know who he was before he became the Dark Lord, I tried looking for any traces of his past. He couldn’t have changed his entire identity overnight and it would be almost impossible for him to erase every single scrap of evidence linking him back to Tom Riddle.”

“You found something?” Harry didn’t bother hiding his eagerness.

“No, I found absolutely nothing,” —Harry’s face fell into a frown comically fast— “but that was to be expected. I’ve only been searching for a couple of days and we have to consider who it is I’m up against here. Voldemort would not have made it easy and for the little pieces he did leave behind, I’m sure he’s got them safely hidden and protected with every spell and curse in existence. No, what I did find had nothing to do with Tom Riddle and everything to do with Voldemort and the prophecy.”

“The prophecy?” Harry exclaimed. “I thought only a handful of people even knew it existed, nevermind know what it says.”

“As far as we could find out, the part about knowing what it says is still true,” Sirius rushed to reassure. “Only thing that’s changed is that it’s more than a handful of us that knows it exists.”

“What does even mean?”

“We’re getting there, pup.”

“You see,” Remus continued, “I’d been leading others to believe that I was looking for information on the war for a paper I was writing on Voldemort himself and that’s how I ran into Timothy Burns.
He works at the Ministry in the Department of Magical History and had agreed to meet with me to answer a few questions.” A mischievous twinkle entered the werewolf’s eye, the likes of which Harry had never seen on his permanently worried face before.

“A couple of drinks into the conversation and he was regaling me with the time he overheard two Unspeakables talking to each other about an interesting section in the Department of Mysteries that no one except them even knew about. The Hall of Prophecies.”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath and almost choked on his tongue. The shock overwhelmed him to the point that he almost missed Remus’ next words.

“This was still when the war with Voldemort was waging and it was the mention of his name that had caught Timothy’s attention. He kept listening long enough to gather that the prophecy had just recently appeared in the Hall and nobody could find out what was in it because they’d need the person the prophecy was about to be there to unlock the words.”

“So the Ministry still doesn’t have a clue what it says,” stated Harry.

“Only the highest ranking officials in the Ministry know the Hall exists and even less know of the existence of this particular prophecy. They can only guess at what it says and after all these years, I’m willing to bet they’ve forgotten about it.”

“Voldemort has been gone for more than a decade,” said Sirius, “it wouldn’t be stupid to assume that the prophecy was about his downfall at your hands and since it’s already been fulfilled in everyone else’s eyes, I doubt they’ve given it much thought.”

“It hasn’t been fulfilled yet, though. Voldemort isn’t dead and neither am I. As soon as he comes back and the attacks start again…” Harry shook his head. “The people who know about the prophecy will see it as their last shot at winning and they’ll be gunning for me to unlock it.”

“That’s not our only concern,” Sirius said in a grim tone. “As of right now, Voldemort only knows half the prophecy. That Death Eater only managed to hear the very end before he was discovered. Voldemort will want to know everything in that prophecy. He’ll come after it, too. And you.”

Harry shrugged. “Him coming after me is not exactly breaking news at this point.”

“It is if he’s back at full strength and not just the wisps of a memory or a leech straddling the line between life and death,” Remus admonished him and Harry immediately regretted telling them of his near misses his first two years.

“There’s nothing we can do about that. Voldemort will come back one way or another,” Sirius jumped in. “Until then, we have time to prepare ourselves for when it happens and we might not be able to stop him coming after you, but there’s still something we can do about him getting his hands on the prophecy.”

Sirius let his statement hang. He watched as slowly, bit by bit, realization dawned on his godson’s face and he was already shaking his head before he could form any words.

“You can’t mean what I think you do,” Harry said.

“We assure you, we do,” Remus answered.

“Do you want to go back to Azkaban? Is that it? You can’t think of a faster way to get there so you decide we should break in to the Ministry of Magic and steal a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries?”
Harry had jumped to his feet mid-way through his speech and had begun pacing the length of the kitchen like a caged tiger.

“We wouldn’t be going in on a whim with our eyes closed and our hands tied behind our backs,” Sirius retorted, a cold glint in the back of his eyes the only hint that Harry’s words had hit him right where they were meant to.

“It would be weeks before we actually set out to do anything. A feat like this one, it would require weeks, if not months, of preparation,” said Remus. “We’ve done stuff like this before in our Order days. We know what to do.”

“You’re crazy!” Harry yelled. “You both are. This is a suicide mission and trust me, I’ve been on enough of those to recognize one when I see it. And this is it.”

“What would you rather have happen, Harry?” Sirius yelled back. “Would you prefer Voldemort storm the Ministry and find the prophecy? Or would you rather he send someone to kidnap you and force you to take it to him yourself? Only the two of you can even touch that thing if we believe what the Unspeakables said. It’s either him or you.”

Sirius’ last words felt like a blow to the gut, rendering Harry breathless within seconds. He’d stopped pacing and took to standing perfectly still instead, hands fisted under crossed arms as he stared diligently at the floor.

Sirius had known the moment the words tripped over his tongue that they’d been too reminiscent to the prophecy for anyone’s comfort. He closed his eyes and wished he could take back the last ten seconds.

The legs of a chair screeched against the floor as Remus rose to his feet and walked to the stove. The sounds of pots, pans and running water filled in for the tense silence and Sirius watched as his godson began to lose the tightness to his arms and eventually sank back into his chair.

“What I’m trying to say is,” Sirius ventured softly, “it’s not him or you right now. You have us. At this point, we’re as in control of the situation as we can possibly be and we cannot lose that.”

“I don’t understand. The prophecy doesn’t even say how, when or if I’m going to defeat him. There’s nothing there.”

“But he doesn’t know that,” said Remus, half turned away as his arms were elbow deep in soapy water. “Voldemort fears what he doesn’t know. Just like everyone else. As the saying goes, ‘knowledge is power’. It didn’t become saying by accident, you know.”

The issue wasn’t pushed any further. By a silent and mutual agreement, Sirius and Remus changed the topic of conversation and gave Harry the time he needed to process. Harry stubbornly kept his thoughts to himself until dinner that evening.

“Fine,” he said, “if you think this is the only way to get to the prophecy before anyone else, then fine, do it.”

Sirius grinned and said, “I’m glad you—”

“But I’m going with you.”

Remus choked on his forkful of mashed potatoes and dissolved into a coughing fit that, to Harry, sounded suspiciously like breathless chuckling. Sirius must’ve thought the same for he glared at his friend and slapped him on the back with more force than was strictly necessary.
“I told you he would say that,” Remus wheezed slightly.

“And I told you I already knew, didn’t I?” Sirius countered. “Pup, much as I would love to recreate the old days with Prongs Junior, I don’t think you coming along is the best idea.”

Harry scoffed. “You’re always saying how I’m exactly like my mum and dad, but when I want to do something they would definitely do, you tell me no?”

“I don’t seem to recall the time when your father broke into the Ministry as a fourteen-year-old to steal a prophecy,” Sirius quipped back. “And it’s funny, because I’m pretty sure something like that would be fresh as rain in my memory.”

“Sarcasm will not get us anywhere, Sirius,” spoke up Remus. “The fact of the matter is that we never did something this big when we were your age, Harry. You have experience getting out of tough situations, there’s no doubt about that, but you’re also untrained and your spells are at a third year level. If you come with us and something goes wrong, what do you think your chances would be against a fully trained Auror?”

“You said it would take weeks to come up with a good plan, though,” Harry argued. “You can teach me in the meantime. You taught me how to perform a Patronus earlier this year.”

“It took us months,” Remus pointed out.

“You said I was a fast learner and I don’t need to know the really advanced spellwork right now. Just enough to be able to help.”

When Remus didn’t answer back right away, Harry took it as a sign that he was getting through to him.

“If all it takes to stand up to some Aurors is a couple of weeks training, then we have bigger problems than we thought,” Sirius declared, uneasy in the face of his friend’s contemplative silence.

“So your big plan is to have you two against the entire Ministry?” demanded Harry.

“Better than bringing a minor with us.”

“But worse than getting caught and leaving said minor alone to fend for himself while you two are carted off to Azkaban.”

That old expression, the one that went ‘you could hear a pin drop in the room’, suddenly became decidedly accurate to the three wizards sitting at the table.

“Something goes wrong and we get discovered. What are the chances having you along will help instead of distract us from our task?”

Although Sirius continued to protest, the delivery was weak and it was easy to tell that Harry’s blunt comment had left him raw and exposed to doubt.

“I’ve never paid much attention to my chances. Pretty sure I’d be dead three times over if I did.” Harry’s soft tone took the sting out of his words and rendered them blunt facts. “I can’t sit here and wait, doing nothing. I’d rather be with you two.”

At that, Sirius turned to Remus. Harry didn’t know what the two of them exchanged between glances and shakes of the head, but they seemed to come to an agreement as Remus leaned forward with his forearms on the table, his meal completely forgotten.
“You will take your lessons seriously. More seriously than anything else you’ve ever done in your life,” stated Remus. “We will teach you everything you can in the short amount of time we have and keeping in mind that we also have to find a way to get into the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries and then come back out.”

“This is not a joke,” said Sirius, face more grave than Harry had ever seen it. “You listen to what we say at all times. If we say run, you run. If we say hide, you hide. If we say you have to hide, run and leave us behind, then that’s what you’re going to do.’

“What? You can’t expect me to—”

“If you want to come with us, those are the rules. They’re non-negotiable,” Sirius stated. “We have to be able to trust you, pup. It’s our way or no way.”

Harry could feel the protest rise up his throat to the tip of his tongue, but he bit his lip and held back. He gave Sirius and Remus a curt nod which received much scrutiny from the former and only a head shake from the latter.

“All right.” Remus clapped his hands together and vanished the plates from the table with a sweep of his wand. “Let’s get started.”

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

Sharp claws slashed into his skin. They were yanked back with force only to be sunk in again, this time catching a path from his ear to the side of his chest and leaving a trail of blood and chunks of displaced flesh. He parried the next blow, but his strength was waning, the lack of blood getting to his head the longer he remained standing. His body was in agony, he was tired. He needed a break.

“Already? You can do better than that,” she goaded him. “Come on. Put up a fight, give me something to do. Show me what you’re made of, Harry.”

He slunk away from the next hit, but retaliated quickly by rolling to the side and jumping on her back. He’d caught her by surprise. She had no time to defend herself before his jaws descended and he aimed straight for the jugular.

The effect was instantaneous and he fell to the ground with her as she lost her footing and collapsed. Warmth trickled down his muzzle and coated the floor in streaks of red.

Off in the distance, he caught the unmistakable sounds of more fighting, but could feel it as another part of him dealt with the far-off threat.

Proud as he was on his success, he gloated over the pile of bodies surrounding him that were slowing disappearing one by one.

He never saw the last blow coming for him until it was too late.

“UGH!”

Alice watched, amused, as her student leaped from his seat as though his pants were on fire. He started to pace the length of their makeshift classroom whilst trying to get his breathing under control along with his frustration. She shook her head at his antics, but suffered through them nonetheless.

“You have no reason to be so angry,” she calmly stated. A dark look was all she got in return for her troubles. “You were very close to keeping me out. Closer than anyone I’ve ever taught before has gotten in such a short amount of time. You did very well.”
“I was so close, though. If I had just kept my guard up, then you wouldn't have won. I would've won for once.” Disappointed beyond words, Harry slumped down in his seat in front of his teacher and levelled her with a helpless look.

“Come now,” she said gently, “no need to get so upset about it. Overall, your defence had been coming along very nicely. You've created your labyrinth, you've placed traps and beings of your choice to keep your thoughts and memories protected—now all you have to work on is how to deal with multiple, powerful attacks. And I think that the little mental fight we just had at least helped in showing you why you should never let down your guard. Not if you want to come out of an attack like that with your secrets to yourself.”

Harry just laid back on the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. “I got cocky,” he said.

“You did. And that lost you the fight.”

Alice rested her wand on the coffee table and and picked up the cup of tea she had waiting for her. “Shall we discuss what you want to talk to me about now, or should we save it for later?”

He didn't bother asking her how she'd known when she'd been traipsing in his head for the past hour.

“Now.”

Alice hummed from the back of her throat and took her time setting down her cup precisely where she’d found it.

“You understand the risks,” she said. “I’ve seen enough in your head to know this is not the first time you’ll be facing an almost impossible task, but it is the first time you’ll be taking on a proactive role. So far, you have been defending yourself against whatever blows come your way in your quest for the truth, but this is completely different, Harry.”

“You don’t have to tell me that, trust me.”

“I think I do,” Alice pressed on. “This will not be like all the other times you’ve faced dangers with your friends. You were within Hogwarts grounds, you were mostly breaking school rules, not laws, and most importantly, you had someone powerful and influential like Dumbledore covering up your tracks and keeping the Ministry at bay when necessary.

“As soon as you step foot in the Ministry as anyone else other than yourself, you’re in trouble. As soon as you enter the Department of Mysteries without authorization, you’re breaking the law. And as soon as you touch that prophecy and place it in your pocket to take with you, you’ve already been convicted.”

With her eyes locked on Harry during the entirety of her speech, Alice was able to pinpoint the exact moment reality started crashing down on him. He was seated with his elbows on his knees and his hands covering his mouth as he stared sightlessly at the carpet under his feet. He didn’t say anything for the longest time and Alice left him to his reflections, sipping her tea and munching on biscuits.

She felt a shift in the air at the same moment Harry slid his hands down his face to clasp them between his legs. She turned her attention to him and was startled to encounter eyes the colour of the deepest forest pool focused entirely on her.

“I do know what I’m getting into, Alice,” he murmured. “I don’t particularly enjoy being reminded of it, but I’m well aware that the consequences we’d face if we get caught are… yeah.” He sighed.
“It would be terrible for all of you,” she insisted, “but we both know who would bear the brunt of the punishment. They will bring in a dementor and have him suck out his soul the second they have him disarmed. There won’t be a chance to rewind the clock and save Sirius this time.”

Harry shook his head and groaned. “I know all that, I do. Just… the way I see it, if I’m there, then I have some chance at stopping things before they get out of control or maybe just… Maybe if I’m there, Sirius will be more careful. And no matter what, they’ll both have an extra wand at the ready.”

Harry looked away and nodded to himself, affirming what he just said.

“Your godfather is not a stupid man, Harry. He would never intentionally do anything that would risk his safety at your expense.”

“He wouldn’t do it on purpose,” Harry conceded, “but doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen.”

“He has Remus,” said Alice.

“And he’s got me, too.”

They held each other’s eyes in a battle of wills that Alice had never held any hope of winning. She glanced away and tamped down the knot of equal parts pride and fear that had settled on her chest.

“Stubborn like a hippogriff, you are.”

“I’ve met one before, you know.”

“I’m sure you got along splendidly.”

Alice felt her face morph into an exasperated smile before she could control it. She was glad she couldn’t when it got her a grin from the boy in front of her.

The sound of a clock striking the hour caught them both by surprise. Harry jumped to his feet and hastily gathered the books he’d scattered around the table.

“I’m sorry, I have to go. I promised someone I’d call and it’s already—”

Alice cocked her head to the side with playfully narrowed eyes and said, “Yes yes, I’ve heard it all before, Mr Potter. Go, before you make your companion wait any longer.”

Harry shouted a hurried ‘thank you’ at the witch and was halfway down the hall before he’d finished the phrase.

In no hurry whatsoever to leave the most comfortable chair in the Black household, Alice leaned into the cushions and continued sipping her lukewarm tea. Not for the first time in the past few weeks (and certainly not for the last, either), Alice found herself pondering Harry Potter.

Compared to the other clients she’d had of his same age, Harry was definitely a special one. His situation was different, he had much more at risk than just about everyone she’d ever taught and, most important of all, he had a good head on his shoulders and a heart of gold to match.

An astonishing combination when she considered all that had happened to him and everything he’d had to sacrifice. And therein lay another unique characteristic that endeared her to the boy. Like her mother and herself, Harry Potter was both a fighter and a survivor.

Alice and her mother had lived in a small apartment in the centre of London during the first eleven years of her life. They’d lived there with her father and, unlike most people, Alice had no fond
memories of that man. From the moment she'd been old enough to remember, all Alice could associate with her father were the patches of black and blue that he’d leave adorning her mother's face after a rough day at work and far too many drinks.

He'd beat her mother at night only to then wake up the next morning as though nothing had happened. He'd ignore the new injuries and wait at the kitchen table for her to dole out his tea and toast like every other morning.

At first, Donna Hansford had tried to hide the truth from her daughter. She thought she’d been succeeding as well, but it was when her spirits had been at their lowest, her hope nothing more than a forgotten whisper drifting away with the wind, that she finally learned the truth.

It had been the morning after one of her husband’s violent moods and she was in the bathroom putting on her makeup to cover the worst of the bruises. As she had brought up the brush to her cheek though, her fingers had shaken and she was reminded of the door she’d had slammed on her hand the night before.

She’d all but given up on her makeup when Alice had shown up. Her little girl of no more than ten years old had wordlessly picked up the brush and run it over the worse of the marks. She’d been inexperienced and that had led to uneven splotches of colour dotting her mother’s face, but Donna hadn’t cared because she’d made a decision. She didn’t have to worry about protecting her daughter from the truth anymore and that had opened up her eyes to a truth that she’d been avoiding herself for years. It was time to move on. Donna just had to figure out how.

Three weeks later, her question was answered when a letter and a surprise visit from a Ministry of Magic official darkened their doorstep. Donna had gathered all the money she'd been saving up in the past ten years from her nursing job and had wiped the apartment clean of her and her daughter's existence. Clad with two passports, four suitcases and a new-found reason to hope, the mother and daughter duo had made their way to the airport one Tuesday afternoon with a letter sporting the Beauxbatons' seal stashed protectively in Donna’s purse.

They'd never looked back.

Starting anew in a completely different country had been hard on both of them, but they’d made it work. Donna had found a job in a children's hospital not far from their new home and it kept her busy when her daughter was off in her magical boarding school. They had led a good life in France, one on which they could look back on and say with absolute certainty that it had been a good life.

Eight years after Alice had finished school, Donna Hansford died. It had been sudden and quick. Alice didn't want to delve into the cause yet again as the only important thing to her was that her mother hadn't suffered and had passed on with the knowledge that she’d managed to save herself and give her daughter the life she’d always wanted her to have.

It had been years since her mother’s death and Alice could still count on hearing the ghost of her mother’s voice whenever she needed it. She couldn’t imagine not having that small comfort in her life and couldn’t even begin to comprehend never having had it, like Harry.

It came as no surprise to her that he was willing to risk everything now that he had found that comfort in Sirius. After all, she would do exactly the same thing.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

The wind whistled through small blades of grass littering the ground in families of thousands. They shivered and resisted its force, gathering together in little groups as though it would strengthen their
A battle of wills occurred, ending when the pull of the lively air current became too much for the green blades to handle and they gave in. Their movements twisted and cracked with the precision of backwards chaos.

A girl with hair the colour of red-hot flames rested on top of the grass. Her feet pointed towards the large set of land that belonged to her family whilst her head was lying comfortably on a navy blue sweater bunched up at the back of her head.

Ginny had just finished de-gnoming the garden with Ron. He’d gone back inside to play a game of Exploding Snap with the twins while she’d stayed out on the garden instead, enjoying the fresh air and limited sunshine that the weather had to offer.

She was watching the clouds fly by. The art of finding shapes in the fluffy white masses was a pastime of hers that she was quite proficient at. She didn’t care that her brothers often made fun of her, saying it was a child’s game and she was already the baby of the family, but that didn’t mean she had to take it literally. She’d roll her eyes if they were at home, curse them a bit and prank them when they least expected it. If they were at school, she’d still roll her eyes and curse them, but she’d also put some of the handy hexes Bill had taught her to good use.

A gust of wind blew over her and made the bottom of her dress fly up to her stomach. A surprised laugh escaped past Ginny’s lips. She let the breeze play against her legs and enjoyed her moment of daring and solitude.

Too soon her moment of light-heartedness was replaced by a dose of melancholy that she couldn’t control.

It had been a while since she’d laughed in such a carefree manner. Not since the Chamber could she remember a single moment when she’d fully let down her guard. Her summers at the Burrow were the closest she’d come.

*I’d swear I can still hear him sometimes*, she thought. *Whispering in my head, telling me what to do. Merlin, what would I have done if he’d made me kill someone? If Harry hadn’t saved me? I couldn’t have lived with myself afterwards.*

A shiver went through her. Memories—no, nightmares—flooded her consciousness from the hole where they’d been securely locked away. Most thought that being possessed by someone (or something) meant that you were completely unaware of what was happening to you.

They were wrong.

She hadn’t been aware of what was happening the first time Tom had taken complete control of her and used her body to walk into the chamber and release the basilisk. She chalked it up to a combination of shock and surprise which had given Tom the upper hand and made it all too easy for him to take the wheel and steer her right where he wanted her. All the other times though, especially after she’d realized her sporadic blackouts were more than a coincidence—those, she remembered them perfectly.

It had taken her a while to realize what was happening to her and when she’d finally figured it out she’d started to put up a fight. It wasn't much, only what her eleven year old self would allow, but it was sufficient for her to resist Riddle’s command to set the basilisk on a hunting spree of Hogwarts students. They’d been petrified anyway, but at least she had the small comfort that none of them were dead.

The pocket she’d sewn onto her dress started to vibrate. Ginny sat up eagerly and plopped her back
against a tree as her hand swiftly took out the mirror she’d sneaked out of her room before leaving to tend to the gnomes.

As soon as her hand closed around the handle, the image reflected on the glass became distorted. Colours danced in the glass until a final image became clear and Harry’s face was staring back at her.

“Hi.”

“All right, Gin?” he asked.

The nickname he’d given her never failed to make her smile before and this time was no different.

“I’m good. I just finished de-gnoming the garden with Ron, actually.” Anticipating his next question, she carried on. “He's good. A bit bored though. I think the only thing keeping him going is the World Cup. He misses you, but doesn’t know you're gone yet. Dumbledore came and explained that your family,” she uttered that word with scorn, “has been keeping you too busy for you to write for a while.”

Harry visibly bristled at being told that Dumbledore was, once again, interfering with matters that had nothing to do with himself.

“That's good, I guess. The less who know the better.”

“What about you? How have you been doing?”

She fiddled with her dress and folded her legs under her. When he hesitated one too many times in responding, she was immediately on alert and studied his face as he thought up of ways to answer her.

“What's wrong?” she demanded.

“Nothing, just have a lot on my mind.” The subtle shift of his eyes was all she needed to see.

“Don't lie to me, Harry. I’ve grown up with six brothers and trust me, I’ve seen it all,” she said. “Harry could be seen taking a deep breath before tilting his head back and gazing at the ceiling, as though waiting for it to give him the answers he needed.

“I-I can't tell you, Gin. Not yet anyway,” he added. “I will though, I promise. Right now it's just too risky—even with the mirrors.”

“But you'll tell me some other time, right?” she pressed on. She didn't like secrets, they only led to bad things from her experience and it made her all the more uneasy that Harry was now purposefully keeping something from her.

“Yeah, I promise,” he grinned at her to take some of the previous sting away and she rewarded him back with a tiny upturn of her lips. “Now, you promised me you'd tell me how you got the twins to return your Donaghan Tremlett doll when you were seven and I’ve been waiting all week to find out so don’t hold out now.”

They spent an hour talking about ordinary things, things that had nothing to do with Harry's destiny, Ginny’s morbid first year, the imminent return of a certain Dark wizard, innocent escaped convicts, misjudged werewolves or meddling old men. And they liked it that way.
It was as Harry was in the middle of regaling Ginny with his godfather's latest attempt at convincing Remus into an all out pranking war, that a shout from the Burrow brought their conversation to an end.

“GINNY! TIME FOR DINNER!”

Ginny reluctantly stood up to start brushing off the dirt and leaves from her dress and picking off the loose bits of bark from her hair. She held above her to keep it out of the way and when she glanced up it was to catch a disappointed look on Harry's face—one he quickly covered up.

“I have to go.”

Harry said nothing, but Ginny knew from the way he was biting his lip and furrowing his brow that he was thinking over something. She started walking back to the Burrow with the mirror in hand and keeping to the tree line as she waited for him to reach some sort of conclusion.

“I can’t tell you anything specific for both our sakes,” he began, “but what I can tell you is that we’re about to do something that will either turn out really well, or really not.”

She waited for him to elaborate and when he couldn’t seem to find the words, she asked, “Is it dangerous?”

“Very.” Harry didn’t shy away from her gaze and though some part of her found his straightforwardness a relief, the memo hadn’t reached the tendrils of fear wrapping around her heart.

“I hope this isn’t your stupid way of saying goodbye, because if it is, let me tell you Harry James Po —”

“No! It’s not that. I wouldn’t—no,” he hurried to assure her. “You’re the only one I can talk to right now and I don’t know when we’re going to go through with this...plan, I guess. So, maybe we’ll get to talk before then, or maybe we won’t and if that’s the case then I don’t want you to think I’m ignoring you or that it’s your fault or anything,” he hesitated. “But I suppose this isn’t much better, is it?”

“Knowing you’re risking your life somewhere instead of just being to busy to talk to me? Not really.”

Ginny had meant to add a bit more bite to her remark, but it came out more sad than she’d anticipated and she looked away before she caught Harry’s expression.

“You’ll tell what it was afterwards?” She didn’t say ‘if’ or ‘maybe’ or any other word that would even touch the possibility that he wouldn’t make it out.

Harry snorted and said, “We pull this off and there’s not a chance in hell I’m not going to tell you exactly how we managed to do that.”

And then, maybe because he could tell that she was still feeling down from his news, Harry did the most un-Harry thing she had ever seen. He winked at her.

Just like that, Ginny felt a grin take a hold of her face and a warmth seep into her cheeks that she hadn’t felt since they’d started getting to know each other. He was levelling her with a pleased (yet somewhat smug, if you asked her) smile and she lightly rolled her eyes at him.

She heard her mother yell at her one more time, this time the sound carrying to Harry as she’d kept walking until she’d reached the edge of the copse of trees and was only a few dozen steps away from
the Burrow’s back door.

“Mum will have kittens if I don’t get there soon,” she said.

“All right. See you soon, Gin.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“For now, right?”

“Just for now.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

They hung up with their hearts a bit heavier, but with smiles still glued to their faces.
Harry’s organs squeaked and screeched within the walls of his chest cavity. They were being squished together and pushed to slide past each other like wheels on a train track. Eyeballs were being pushed further inside their sockets. So far, in fact, that he could’ve sworn he’d be able to see out the back of his head by the end of this journey.

He could feel all the air in his lungs being expelled out of him in one fell swoop as the bands of time and space coiled around him in a punishing embrace. He could’ve sworn he was in that limbo for hours and yet, could not be certain it hadn’t been mere seconds since the feeling had begun.

*Crack!* 

His feet hit the ground with so much force that his legs gave out, forcing his knees to take their place as they smacked against the ground with teeth rattling force. He felt his breakfast coming up to bid him good morning, but swallowed it back and instead chose to brace himself on the rocky pavement with his head bent between his shoulders.

“Remind me why wizards don’t just take the bus or flag a taxi?” he snarled.

Sirius let out a barking laugh as he bent down to pat the queasy teen on the head. “Where would the fun be in that, Harry? Plus, think of all the excitement we add to our lives when we suddenly go *whoosh! and appear out of nowhere!*”

“Not to mention the money we save in doing so,” said Remus, having just apparated not two metres away from them.

“Hmm, true true,” muttered Sirius as he took a look around the back alley they’d just shown up in.

They’d picked the unobtrusive alleyway that belonged to the Chi Ming Chinese Restaurant located right in the centre of Muggle London for a reason. Disguised in their glamours with their wands hidden inside their arm holsters and armed to their ears with any and all magical oddity and weapon that could come in handy, the three men had deemed themselves ready to brave their way into the British Ministry of Magic.

After ensuring his breakfast would stay where it rightfully belonged, Harry signalled the okay to his two companions and they were off.

Stepping out from the back street and blending into Muggle traffic was remarkably easy. Thanks to their ordinary clothing and average appearance, the three men passed by largely unnoticed as they bumped into people who were too absorbed in their own affairs to even glance their way.

They walked two blocks before Sirius grabbed Harry by his upper arm and led him down another street. Glancing around, Harry observed that despite the large group of people in the previous avenue, they seemed to have entered an alternate universe in regards to this one.

“Slight Muggle-Repelling Charms cover this whole street for security reasons,” explained Remus, having noticed the sceptical look on Harry’s face. “They’re not strong enough to completely keep them from coming down this way—for practical reasons since Muggles do live here—but they’ll keep any Muggle from venturing into where they don’t belong.”

“And where is that?”
“Right here.”

In front of them, Sirius was holding the door open to a public, red and white telephone booth. The same one that could be spotted all over England and that tourists seemed to have a strange obsession with. Except that this one seemed the worse for wear, having a few panes of glass missing and sporting scratches and scuff marks to accompany the Muggle graffiti.

“What an entrance,” Harry remarked.

“Inconspicuous as they come,” Remus replied. “Now step back and let us work our magic.”

Sirius snorted and took out his stolen wand. Together, him and Remus performed the spells they’d discussed at length while planning this operation while Harry stood by the corner of the street, on the look-out for anyone passing by.

It took longer than Harry had expected and he was twirling his wand back and forth in his hand as he rushed to their side. Both Sirius and Remus were sporting a light sheen of sweat on their foreheads, but Harry didn’t think they cared as they all sped to the alley they’d chosen which gave them a perfect view of the phone box.

At 9:03 on the dot, Jonathan Hastings rounded the corner and walked straight up to the phone box, a copy of the newspaper under his arm while his hands nursed a paper cup of coffee. He was a Muggle-born who worked at the Ministry as the Head for a department that was only just slightly below Mr Weasley’s in terms of importance. However, his mere ranking as a department head meant he could gain access to the Department of Mysteries if the occasion called for it and that was all the trio had needed to know.

Mr Hastings didn’t bother glancing up from the his cup as he reached out a hand to pull open the door to the phone box. And perhaps if he had, his wizard’s instinct would’ve kicked in and warned him something was off and it would’ve caused him to hesitate before stepping any further. But, as it was, he didn’t look up until he felt a suspicious tug in his stomach and when he did finally chance a peek around himself, it was to come face to face with the side of a dumpster.

He wasn’t given time to process before he was stunned from behind.

“See? Piece of cake,” Sirius boasted as he grabbed the fallen man’s arms and propped him against a wall. He searched the wizard’s robes, pocketed his wand and let out a cheerful whistle as he pulled out a ring of strange keys and curious tokens.

“Is that it?” asked Harry.

“This is the one,” confirmed Sirius.

“Best get a move on,” said Remus. “The Stunning Spell will only last an hour at most with no one to revive him. We’ve hit him twice—”

“Three times,” Sirius added sheepishly.

“Three times? We’re lucky he hasn’t fallen into a coma, then.” Remus shook his head. “In any case, that should give us three hours maximum to do what we have to. Everything ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Yup.”
“Let’s go.”

Remus placed one last Disillusionment Charm on Mr Hastings before they left and also took care of tying his hands and feet together with rope and sealing his lips with a spell Harry didn’t recognize.

“The spell on his mouth will wear off about fifteen minutes after he comes to. That’s just to give us an extra bit of time if we need it. The ropes are just to slow him down a bit,” Remus had explained as they’d marched up to the phone box.

When they managed to close the door behind them, Harry was surprised to find out it wasn’t as tight a squeeze as he thought it would be and wondered if he’d ever get used to living around magic like everyone else.

An odd thought came to him then. How odd must look to a Muggle to see three men locking themselves inside a telephone booth, never mind watching a queue of oddly dressed men and women waiting for their turn to use the telephone early in the morning only for the line to get progressively shorter and shorter with no one actually coming out of the cabin after they’d gone in.

Harry was brought out of his musings by the low mumblings of his godfather as he started dialling on the telephone.

“Six two four four two.”

As the dial whirred back into place a cool female voice greeted them from inside the box.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Kindly state your name and business or provide personal identification.”

Sirius took out Mr Hastings' wand and fed it into the change slot for returning coins. The wand was sucked up into the machine and after a series of clicks and whirs, it was spat out without further ceremony.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic, Mr Jonathan Hastings. Remaining occupants, kindly state your name and business or provide personal identification.”

Harry felt a trickle of cold sweat bead in the back of his head and trickle down his back. He locked his muscles tight and barely even allowed himself to breathe as Sirius brought his stolen wand to his throat and uttered the exact words they’d discussed in their plans.

“These two wizards are my guests for the day,” Sirius said in Mr Hastings' voice.

“One moment, please.”

They waited for a few seconds before they heard a whirring sound coming from inside the telephone machine. The female voice started speaking again at the same time that three identification badges were pushed out of the same metal chute that had received the pilfered wand.

“Visitors to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium. We hope you enjoy your visit to the British Ministry of Magic.”

The floor underneath their feet gave a slight shudder that rocked the box and jostled its occupants. The pavement began to slowly rise on all sides through the windows and Harry had enough presence of mind to gather they were moving underground. Darkness covered them from head to toe for all of a millisecond before some lights turned on inside the box. A loud grinding noise followed them as
they sank deep into the headquarters of the Ministry of Magic.

Seconds later, a sliver of light caressed their feet and gradually rose until the entire cabin was lit from the outside. Harry was immediately bombarded with flashes of green light as witches and wizards flooed in and out of the Atrium from the fireplaces located in the walls of the grand hall.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,” said the female voice.

All of a sudden, the doors swished open and the group of men were forced to stumble out. With nigh a sound, the telephone box slid back up in the air and through the ceiling, a rippling motion forming across the glass and metal of the building structure as the box glided right through it.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic, pup,” said Sirius as he straightened his back and led their little group forward.

As they walked through the halls of the Ministry of Magic, Harry couldn't help but feel like he was eleven years old again and Hagrid had just hit the right bricks with his handy pink umbrella to show him the wonders of Diagon Alley. Similar to back then, Harry couldn't seem to agree with himself on where to look first.

The ceiling caught his attention first. He watched in rapt attention as different symbols—in a language he’d never encountered—popped in and out of existence in random places, staying only long enough for him to catch a glimpse of them before they dissolved into strands that spanned the length of the ceiling. New symbols soon took their place as the strands faded and the process began all over again. It made Harry’s eyes hurt and the longer he stared at them, the worse the pain became until he couldn’t bear the stabbing in his head and had to turn away.

*If magic had its own language, I bet that’s what it would look like,* he thought.

Halfway down the hall, they came across a white marble fountain adorning the centre of the Atrium. A group of golden statues stood in the middle of the round pool. They were larger than life-size and depicted a noble-looking wizard, who stood tall above the rest, pointing his wand straight up to the ceiling. The likeness of a beautiful witch had her arms wrapped around the man and grouped around them were a centaur, an elf and a goblin, all three of which were gazing up adoringly at the magical couple. Jets of clear water were glittering forth from the tip of the two wands, the tip of the centaur's arrow, the point of the goblin's hat and the tips of both the elf’s ears.

Harry felt uneasy as he looked at the statues. While its purpose had been to show the unity between the different races, Harry would be a fool not to notice the other, more sinister message it was broadcasting. Even in this, the wizarding race had managed to have the last word.

They had almost finished rounding the fountain when Harry noticed the Knuts and Sickles winking at him from the bottom of the pool. The sign they passed by was so worn out by age that Harry barely distinguished the words ‘proceeds’ and ‘St Mungo’s’.

He stuck a hand inside his pocket and took out a Galleon. He tossed it into the water as he passed by and watched the ripples it made on the surface as the piece of gold sunk to the bottom of the pool. If Sirius and Remus noticed, they didn’t mention it.

A waddling wizard carrying an enormous pile of parchment bumped into him and nearly caused his whole bounty to go tumbling to the ground. Harry watched as the tower of paper teetered at an impossible angle before more or less righting itself again as they wizard kept walking. *Magic.*

A flock of paper airplanes trailed after the wizard in question and even more descended from the
ceiling to head off in different directions. Some of the airplanes bumped their pointy ends against people’s heads and Harry observed as they were plucked from the air, opened, and read by whoever they were meant to go to.

“How come they use paper airplanes instead of something else? Like owls?” asked Harry.

Remus chuckled slightly, “Can you imagine the mess it would make if the Ministry of Magic had dozens of flying owls delivering messages between departments? We'd be wading through bird droppings and feathers if that were the case.” Harry winced at the picture Remus had so artfully painted and nodded.

“Quick,” hissed Sirius, “turn your badges and move to the right. Security station coming up. Don’t look, just keep walking.”

They shuffled to the right, but Harry could still spot the security guard sitting behind a large, black machine. There was a queue of people by his station who placed their wands in the machine and walked forward to retrieve them from the other side as the guard gave them a distracted nod and licked his thumb to pass the page more easily. He wasn’t even sparing them a glance as they walked by and though Harry suspected knowing the identity of his guests through their wands had a lot to do with the man’s indifference, all Harry had to do was wait a couple of hours to know the guard would be regretting his behaviour soon.

The crowd jostled Harry as the three of them made their way to the golden gates at the back end of the hall. On the other side of them they found a much smaller, round hall that housed at least twenty elevators behind wrought golden grilles.

I’m starting to see a pattern here, Harry mused as he took in the rich metals.

The three wizards joined the crowd in front of one of the elevators. A great amount of rattling and clattering announced its arrival as the golden grilles slid open and two handfuls of Ministry employees spilled out. In spite of the Enlargement Charms that Harry was certain had been placed on the machine, it was a tight fit for all twenty-three of the people that had climbed in. The grilles shut with a mighty crash and the car was set into motion. Chains could be heard clinking against each other as the elevator sunk to the next level.

The same woman’s voice that had greeted the group at the telephone box was with them now.

“Level Seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office.”

The doors opened and Harry was offered a glimpse of a messy corridor along with snatches of equally messy offices and desks that were covered in Quidditch memorabilia, and not just from Britain either, but from all over the world it seemed. Six wizards and eight witches got out before the doors closed and they went down again.

“Level Six, Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparition Test Centre.”

Five people got out this time, including a witch with a box of what appeared to be random bits of trash, but based on the floor they were on, Harry was willing to bet they were Portkeys already, or were on their way to becoming one soon.

“Level Five, Department of International Magical Cooperation, incorporating the...”

Harry stopped listening at this point as about fifteen of those flying airplane memos had just entered
the elevator and were hovering serenely above their heads. There were so many that they blocked the light coming from the ceiling, causing abrupt flashes of brightness to light up the the inside. One man got out this time and that left Remus, Sirius and Harry alone.

Sirius immediately began waving Mr Hastings' wand all over the walls. While Mr Burns had been chatty about a great many things, he hadn’t been able to offer much insight on how to access the Department of Mysteries other than the broken tidbits he’d occasionally overhear from loose lipped colleagues. The most he’d been able to tell them was that only Department Heads had access to the elevators leading to the Department of Mysteries and that many suspected it was thanks to a special, unique key.

Harry was brought back from his musings when a portion of the wall lit up under Sirius’ wand movements. The metal rippled and sunk into itself to create a keyhole just as the elevator stopped moving.

“Welcome, Mr Hastings,” chimed the automated voice of the Ministry. “If you wish to proceed, please place your key in the slot.”

“It doesn’t look like any other special keys I’ve seen,” Remus remarked.

“And you’ve seen a lot of those, have you, Moony?” said Sirius as he dropped a hand in his pocket and took out Mr Hastings' keyring.

“Mr Hastings didn’t happen to label his keys, did he?” asked Harry with a sinking feeling in his gut as he watched his godfather paw through at least two dozen keys and many more trinkets.

Sirius snorted. “No such luck here, pup.”

“What happens if we choose the wrong one?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see.”

Sirius had pushed a key in the slot before anyone could react. The keyhole flushed a dark red and the colour spread to the key in Sirius’ hand, making him let out a pained yelp as the metal burned his skin. The elevator shook and dropped a floor under their feet in warning as the overhead voice spoke to them.

“Mr Hastings, failure to present the correct form of verification will result in the immediate shutdown of this transportation system and the alerting of the Auror offices. This is your last communication. Have a pleasant day.”

The lights flickered in a deliberate reminder of their precarious situation and the three wizards were left staring at each other across the narrow space. Two pairs of eyes were narrowed and accusing, while the last pair was open wide and sheepish.

“That did not turn out how I expected it to,” muttered Sirius.

“Really? You don’t say,” snapped Remus. “If when the Aurors arrive to scrape us off this elevator and we’re not dead, I’d like you to explain to me exactly how you thought that would turn out on our one-way trip to Azkaban!”

“Moony, I had no idea—”

“We’re breaking into the Department of Mysteries! Did you think they’d just give us infinite tries to do so? Give me that.” Remus snatched the keyring from Sirius’ hands and approached the keyhole as
the two of them continued to argue.

Harry was prepared to step in at any moment and pull them apart, but when he saw that had actually evolved into discussing the mysterious key, he let them continue to bicker and focused on the wall instead.

The place where the keyhole had appeared looked like it had always been there and Harry wondered if that was really the case and the normal wall was just a cover, or if the keyhole just appeared from nowhere when someone called it. As he continued to stare at it, he felt something nagging him at his temples and spreading to the upper half of his face until he could feel his heart pounding in his eyes.

He squeezed his eyes shut and massaged them into his head for good measure. Spots danced in his vision as he opened them again and for a second he thought he was still seeing things as the keyhole swirled with different colours and shapes, like the ceiling in the Atrium.

He swept his eyes over the entire wall to see that the phenomenon wasn’t limited to the hidden keyhole, but rather spread to the whole elevator. The colours and shapes on the walls weren’t nearly as condensed or varied as the ones encircling the keyhole, but it was still an amazing sight to behold.

Harry edged closer to get a clearer look and that’s when he spotted the single strand separated from the rest and hovering halfway between the wall and Remus, its end tilted and up and undulating gently, almost as if it were reaching for something.

*Maybe because it is.*

Remus had been mid-sentence when Harry plucked the keyring from him and turned to face the wall.

“Harry! What are—” Harry shushed him and waved them both away as he studied the keys and the single strand of light now reaching for him.

The assortment of keys and baubles fit in the palm of his hand and he fingered through them, searching for something he wasn’t even sure he’d recognize. His fingers landed on a medallion with the insignia of the Appleby Arrows Quidditch team and Harry couldn’t tell what it was that made him stop there, but he’d long learned not to question his instincts considering how often they had saved his life.

“It’s this one,” he announced, dangling the medallion for Sirius and Remus to see.

“That’s not a key,” Sirius said it slowly, as though he were worried Harry didn’t know that himself. “We’re looking for a key to fit in that lock, not some third rate Quidditch souvenir.”

“I don’t know how to explain it to you, but I know this is it,” Harry insisted.

“Harry, we don’t—”

“And we can spend ages arguing about it, or we can try it and finally get to the Department of Mysteries because we’re running out of time.”

Remus and Sirius exchanged looks and it was Remus who spoke up.

“How are you so certain? If you’re wrong, this could mean our deaths.”

Harry swallowed back the fear crawling into his heart and said, “I just am. It’s… It’s got the same magic. The colours and the shapes, I can see them and it’s almost like—like they’re calling to each
If anything, the two men appeared to be even more uncertain now which had been the complete opposite of what Harry had been looking to achieve.

“Trust me on this?”

“We trust you, Harry,” said Remus. “Sirius and I weren’t making any progress and if you’re certain this is the key,” —he shared another look with Sirius— “then we better hurry.”

That had been exactly what Harry needed to hear, so he ignored the dead weight settling in his stomach in favour of doing what he always did—taking action and hoping for the best.

Inches away from the keyhole, the medallion changed shape in Harry’s hand and next thing they knew, he was sliding a key into the lock and twisting it to the right. There was a click and the keyhole sunk back into the wall. The number nine appeared next on the control panel. Harry pressed it and the elevator began its descent to the ninth floor.

Harry stepped away from the wall and felt like he could finally breathe when his godfather laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He felt a gentle tap on his head and then it was like an egg was cracked on his hair and travelled down to cover him from head to toe.

The grilles slid open to the Department of Mysteries without a sound.

There was a shimmer in the air caught by the fire of the torches lining the corridor as Remus stepped out of the elevator. Sirius’ shimmer soon followed and Harry stepped out just as the grilles drifted shut and the elevator rose to disappear through the ceiling.

There was only one door and it was at the end of the hallway. The three wizards stuck to the wall and darted from shadow to shadow, just like they’d discussed. There was no one around to catch the blur of colours as they sped from one place to the next. The door at the end of the hall wasn’t locked and it opened with a push and closed with another.

They were in a dark, circular room with dozens of doors lining the walls. Everything was black and the only way Harry could make out the doors was by the flickering of the blue flames in the torches between them and the solitary silver knockers in the middle of each door.

“This is not good,” whispered Remus. “There are more than two dozen doors here and we don’t know how big the rooms behind them are.”

“We have to start somewhere,” said Sirius. No one stopped him as he walked up to a door and pulled it open.

Sunshine spilled out from the room Sirius had uncovered. They were assaulted with the smell of fresh earth after a summer’s rain and the songs of birds and cries of other animals.

“Was it that? An indoor zoo?” asked Harry.

“It’s like someone cut out a piece of rainforest and stuck it in this room,” Sirius said wonderingly. “If I knew this was the type of things Unspeakables got up to—”

A deafening growl had the hairs along Harry’s arms standing on end. The growl rose to a roar and Harry had his wand out in front of him as the next sound to follow was the rhythmic thump of something massive and dangerous headed towards them.
Sirius paled and shut the door with a bang. He jumped away from it for good measure and was glad no one could see the look on his face for he was sure he wouldn’t want to see it himself.

“No, that’s not—” he cleared his throat noisily. “That’s definitely not what we’re looking for. We should try another door.”

At the suggestion, there was a rumble in the room and the torches along the walls dimmed and began moving sideways. The wall was rotating and beginning to gain speed until the torches were nothing more than a thin stripe of neon blue lining the room’s circumference. Just as suddenly, the movement came to a halt and the room was left the same as it had been before.

“Well,” said Remus, “this changes things.”

“Unspeakables,” spat Sirius. “I’m starting to think they just like toying with people and keeping their experiments secret is just a bonus.”

“We can’t get out anymore. The door we used to come in could be any one of these. They’re all identical,” said Harry frustratedly. “We didn’t even realize when we came in. We should’ve marked it.”

“We can start now,” said Remus. The charms to make them blend into their surroundings had worn off by this point so Harry and Sirius were able to see the door Remus was headed for and they ran after him with the memory of what they’d encountered last time still fresh in their minds.

They braced themselves as Remus nudged the door open and each of them held their breaths as they heard murmurs and the clinking of glass coming from the new room. Remus peeked inside for a moment before slowly letting the door fall shut with nary a whisper. He pointed his wand at the wood and painted an orange x on its surface. They all scrambled back to the middle of the room just in time for the walls to start rotating.

“It was evening dinner with the Queen if she ate in a potions laboratory,” said Remus. “It was the most bizarre thing I have ever seen.”

The walls stopped turning and Harry was relieved to see that the paint had held and they now had one door clearly marked as done. They moved onto the next one and repeated the cycle over and over again. Sirius suggested at one point in the seventh minute that they separate and open one door each, but the room wouldn’t allow it and Harry had to give his grudging respect to whoever invented it.

They were at their tenth door—a room which resembled a large dungeon sprinkled with candles and clocks of all shapes and sizes—when Harry began to feel restless and on edge.

“How much time do we have left?” he asked as the walls began their circuit once more.

Sirius checked his watch and said, “About an hour and a half. We’ve lost a lot of time in here. Have you noticed that it’s taking longer and longer for the doors to rearrange themselves?”

Harry hadn’t, but he saw Remus on his other side nodding stiffly.

“We only have time for another three doors if they keep slowing down,” said Remus. “We take any more time and we run the risk of getting caught in the midday rush.”

“Eleventh time’s the charm,” Harry muttered as he stepped forward to open the door.

It was a dark and large room, much like the one they were standing in, only this one housed rows
upon rows of long shelves higher than the eyes could see. Every shelf was packed to the brim with orbs of different sizes with more than an honest layer of dust covering their surfaces.

Harry craned his head from side to side as he took in the sight before him and stumbled into the room.

“I think this might be it,” he whispered, unwilling to break past the stillness in the air.

“I think you might be right,” said Sirius.

The was a click as the door behind them was closed and they lost what little light had been sneaking into the room. With only solitary candles hovering in the air at lengthy intervals, the three wizards reflexively lit their wands.

“You’re both sure the trace won’t act up?” asked Harry, voicing his greatest concern.

“The Ministry is holding a function for the sons and daughters of all their employees today,” Remus recited, already familiar with the words he’d had to repeat many times over in the past weeks of preparation. “They only do it once a year over the holidays to make sure the children can attend and it lasts the entire day. Even the magic we did around the Muggle entrance wouldn’t be enough to call anyone’s attention. Plenty of Muggle-borns with magical children work here.”

Harry chewed the inside of his cheek and dispelled his discomfort with a shake of his head. He believed Remus and it wouldn’t do any of them any favours if Harry let his fears get to his head, so he pushed them to the back of his mind and focused on the rows upon rows of glass orbs bracketing him from the sides.

They reached the end of their line of shelves to be met with the start of another only a couple of steps away. Harry pushed his head around the corner and muffled a curse when he saw no end in sight. As far as he could see, the shelves had no end in sight.

“All right, so this is the Department of Mysteries,” he muttered to himself, “there has to be some sort of system, they can’t just throw the prophecies on random shelves when they get them.”

“There’s a plaque here with a number and a letter,” Sirius spoke up from behind Harry, almost causing the young wizard to jinx him in surprise.

“There as well,” said Remus, lighting the end of a shelf a row up from Sirius on the opposite side. “1940 and the letter A.”

“I have 1941, B. I’m guessing the number is the year the prophecy was made and the letter must be for a name, maybe the person who the prophecy is about or the one who made it,” Sirius speculated. “We can’t be sure though. It could be it has nothing to do with any names at all. But if we have the years sorted vertically...”

“Then we have a lot of walking to do before we reach 1980,” said Harry, already stepping past the next row of shelves. “Time?”

“We have an hour left,” said Remus. “I suggest we hurry.”

Remus’ advice was taken to heart and they began a brisk jog along the narrow corridors. They encountered no one on their way to the prophecy, but Harry was adamant in not letting his guard down for anything in the world. They had been at the Ministry for the past two hours with none the wiser and had had a relatively easy time of it getting into the Department of Mysteries. Harry had no doubt that any moment now, their luck would run out, just like it always did in situations like these,
and he wasn’t about to let it catch him by surprise.

The shelving unit with the plaque ‘1980’ was just like every other row of shelves they had passed by and Harry felt the weight of what he was about to do sitting heavy on his chest. It only took him a moment to catch his breath and he tried not to let it get to his head that his godfather and Remus were still panting off to the side by the time Harry started to run his wand across the shelves, shedding light on the dusty name plates affixed to the metal railings.

He was halfway down the second row when he found what he was looking for on row 97.

*S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D*

*Dark Lord*

*and (?) Harry James Potter*

“I found it,” he called out and was immediately flanked by Sirius and Remus. “It’s actually here,” he whispered.

“Forty-one minutes,” said Remus, his voice strained and overflowing with tension. “We’re taking longer than we thought we would and we are quickly running out of time. Hastings could be waking up at any moment now and the ropes will only slow him down as long as the charms hiding him hold together.”

“We’re sorry, pup, but we have to go,” said Sirius. “Now.”

“Right,” Harry breathed out. He was still captivated by the glass orb housing the couple of sentences that had haunted him his entire life without him even knowing.

His fingers were closing around the glass and bringing the orb to his chest without his permission. It was warm. His fingertips left trails through the dust layering the glass as Harry twisted the orb back and forth in his hand.

“We have to go, Harry,” said Sirius, placing a hand on his godson’s shoulder to shake him out of his stupor. “Put it away, pup.”

“I can almost hear it. It’s like someone is whispering to me from far away and all I want to do is get closer, so I can hear what they have to say,” said Harry.

“You know what it says, Harry. Put it away now,” urged Sirius.

Careful not to touch the prophecy (from what he had seen so far, Sirius wouldn’t put it past Unspeakables not to have a couple surprises awaiting confident thieves), Sirius pushed on Harry’s arm and brought his hand down to the side. Harry took the hint and wordlessly pulled his backpack to his front and dropped the prophecy inside. His mind felt less clouded the moment it was out of his hands and he resolved to work harder on his Occlumency training the next time he saw Alice.

“Let’s go.”

They were rushing back the same direction they had come from when the other shoe—the one Harry had been dreading since they had found the Hall of Prophecy—dropped down on them with the force of an anvil. Only they didn’t know it yet.

Harry was taking the lead with Sirius and Remus two steps behind him as they raced against the clock to reach their only exit. They were about to turn a corner when Harry thought to look past the
glare from the light on his wand tip and to the deep recesses of the hall ahead.

What should have been another corridor lined with shelves and sparse lighting, was instead a walkway through a festival of lights. Just like with the ceiling of the Atrium and the keyhole in the elevator, the hallway ahead of them was fit to bursting with interlocking strings of magic of different colour, thickness and length. They wove into and out of, over and under each other like wily snakes.

In his inspection of the magical light show, Harry had slowed down in his running and had fallen back to the point that Remus was now sprinting only a couple of metres in front of him, but it was enough of a difference for him to be the first to reach the the magical weave. The second his foot passed through one of the strands, the filament turned a bright red which it then quickly spread to the rest of its kind at such a speed that Harry was only given a second to react.

“GET DOWN!”

Harry used his running momentum to launch himself off his feet and crash straight into Remus, pulling the werewolf down with him as the corridor ahead of them exploded in a mesh of glass, metal and fire. A wave of pure heat and raining glass washed over them and had them rolling across the floor with the force of the blast.

Harry’s ears were ringing and his brain felt like it had been liquified to mush in his skull. His limbs felt like they were made out of lead as he forced himself to stagger to his feet. A hand squeezing around his ankle had Harry turning around to see Sirius sprawled on the floor behind him, gashes on his cheeks and a thick layer of dust everywhere.

“Ha-Ha-Harry,” he coughed out. “S’plosion… Harry… Wherz… Wherz Moon-y?”

Harry helped his godfather to his feet and darted quick eyes at the destruction around them. There was the expected debris littering the hall and bits of scorching metal still falling through the air but the more Harry searched around, the clearer it became that it hadn’t been just a simple explosion which had nearly knocked them cold for the last time.

There were shards of broken glass and pieces of metal everywhere, but as the clouds of dust began to clear, Harry saw that the shelves of prophecies were where they had always been and showed no signs of having been used as flying shrapnel.

They found Remus leaning against a shelving unit two rows closer to the blast than they had been. The explosion had flung him into the structure and torn his breath away along with breaking a couple of ribs, but he had fought to remain conscious and stumbled to them when he glimpsed them coming.

“Anybody hurt?” rasped Remus.

“We’re fine. A couple scrapes and bruises never killed anyone,” croaked Sirius. “What will kill us is the legion of Aurors on their way to pick up our pieces.”

“We cannot go back the same way we came in,” said Remus. “We need to find another way out.”

“Even if there is another door that could lead us out, how are we supposed to find it? This place is enormous and I don’t think the Unspeakables would’ve marked some fire exits for us,” said Harry. “There might not even be another way out.”

Harry’s last words were accompanied by the cracking of many Apparitions as wizards and witches in the red robes of the Auror Department apparated all around them. Harry tightened his grip on his wand and readied his posture, calling back on the weeks of training that had been drilled into him.
“If there isn’t another way out,” hissed Sirius, eyes darting around him, “then we make one. Now, run!”

Sirius and Remus didn’t give the Aurors any time to regroup at finding them alive. Remus fired off a spell that dosed the area in a blindingly bright light, forcing the Aurors to cover their eyes from the glare or trip back on their own feet as they tried to get away. Sirius toppled anyone left standing as the overwhelming pitch and volume of his noise spell had the Aurors falling to their knees in agony.

The spells were short-lived ones, only meant to last five seconds before the effect would wear off and the victims would begin to recuperate. But that was enough time for Sirius, Remus and Harry to put the Aurors three shelves behind them as they ran for their lives.

They didn’t make it very far.

The Aurors recovered fast and were soon on their tail, shooting spell after spell at them, some of them hitting the ground at their feet and bringing up a small explosion of concrete to life while others flew directly over their heads. It was a spell of the latter variety which sped two metres ahead of Harry to morph into a spiderweb of a net which stretched from shelf to shelf and blocked their path. Harry couldn’t stop fast enough and ran headlong into it, bouncing back into Remus’ startled arms.

“They’re too close,” Sirius panted. “Pup, take down the net. Moony and I will distract them.” He was gone before Harry could find the moment to argue. He tried to ignore the sounds of spellfire and grunts of pain and anger as he focused on his own task.

“Confringo!”

The blast of fire engulfed the web in an explosion of heat and smoke, but when the clouds cleared, the net showed no signs of damage and gleamed smugly at Harry.

“Expulso! Incendio! Evanesco!”

Harry growled as the web remained exactly where it was. He released a flurry of all the destructive spell, curses and charms he knew, some of which he’d only read about and had never had the chance to try.

His cheeks were burning red from exhaustion and the blowback from the explosions. Behind him, he could hear the fighting becoming louder, more desperate as his godfather and Remus attempted to engage a group of Aurors four times their own number.

Think think think! What is it about this spell? Why can’t I destroy it?

What does it need?

It was that last thought and the stabbing throb of the burns covering his face which gave Harry an idea.

“Glacius!”

The blast of cold air seeped into the net, changing the colour of the structure from a light gray to a clear white as the spirals froze solid. Harry blasted the web apart with a slash of his wand just in time to feel Sirius’ back bump into his own as the pair of wizards were forced to retreat from the onslaught of spells being shot at them.

“Net’s down! Come on!”
Harry put up a shield as Sirius and Remus darted past him. They dispensed the same spells they had used to escape the last time and were quickly on the run once more. They made it as far as seven shelves down before the ground opened up underneath their feet. The three wizards fell screaming through the darkest of airs for an indeterminable amount of time.

Harry would have said they were falling for hours, but it was seconds after the floor swallowed them whole when he finally spotted a fissure of light growing bigger and brighter the deeper they fell. He had a flash of a different fall, one which happened outside in the rain with only the fearsome embrace of the dementors to break his fall until Dumbledore had stood up from the stands and yelled—

“**Arresto Momentum!**”

The cement floor which would have been their final resting place was turned into the softest of cradles as Harry’s charm slowed them down enough to have time to right themselves mid-air and land lightly on their feet.

“Merlin’s beard!” Remus exclaimed, legs twitching under him like a newborn fawn’s. “That was some quick thinking, cub.”

“Saved our sorry arses, I’d say,” said Sirius.

Harry’s shrug was at odds with the terror still filtering through his blood. “One of my near death experiences was bound to come in handy at some point.”

After that short exchange, they became silent. They had landed in a small, square room with no windows, a single sconce (which only served to light a questionable patch of brown marking the black floor) and a rusted metal door. A simple *Alohomora* had the door creaking open and confirmed Harry’s suspicions vis à vis the brown spill on the ground, the thousand metres fall and the uncharmed door.

They emerged into a room equipped exactly like a modern Muggle laboratory with two doors in each wall. Harry had seen enough films to recognize the makings of the cliché villain’s evil lair. If Harry hadn’t known any better, he would have thought the Aurors had transported them to a set of one of those movies and now that he thought about it further, he wouldn’t put it past the Unspeakables to have done precisely that.

They each went their own way as they explored the new room. It was odd to Harry, to see Muggle science equipment sharing the same table as bronze cauldrons and potion ingredients. There were pots, pans and beakers simmering and bubbling in odd places around the room, giving Harry the impression that although it may have looked deserted, the room was clearly set in waiting for its occupants to come back.

“Disgrace… Expected better out of the Ministry’s finest… Should’ve gotten rid of them when we had the chance…”

Harry froze in his perusal as another voice, this one too deep and gritty to be carried through the walls, joined the first one and rose in volume as the people talking approached one of the doors on the left.

Movement to the right caught Harry’s attention and he turned to have Sirius’ finger frantically pointing at him from across the room. Sirius gestured for him to hide as the man sought his own position behind a cupboard. Remus stationed himself on Harry’s side of the room, crouching behind a large plant and held his wand ready at his side.
“I am telling you, Auror Matterson, if it had been up to us Unspeakables, these intruders would have been taken care of hours ago. They would not even have made it past the first door if the Ministry did not continue ignoring our requests for extra funding in the Department of Mysteries,” said the supremely vexed voice of a man wearing scientists’ robes as he marched into the room with three other Unspeakables and seven Aurors at his heels.

“And as I keep telling you, Mr Smith, I am in no way in charge of how the Ministry chooses to dispense its funds,” one of the Aurors answered.

“This is our department,” the Unspeakable continued, “and we would have handled the breach perfectly well by ourselves if you had let us. It was our Proximity Spell which caught a prophecy on the move and it would have been our specialists who would have recovered said prophecy.”

“Do you know which one was taken?”

“To inventory the entire Hall of Prophecies would take us months, if not years, to complete. And that is not even mentioning the damage caused to many other prophecies in the skirmish your Aurors caused.”

They were moving at a steady pace to the room Harry, Remus and Sirius had landed in.

“Yes, skirmish,” —enunciated the Auror, sarcasm dripping from every syllable— “that is exactly what I was thinking as my men and women put their lives in jeopardy to recover some tired old piece of…”

The group of Aurors and Unspeakables were crossing past the middle of the room when Harry caught Remus signalling to him and Sirius from his vantage point. He pointed to the potions simmering in a table close to the group and to a set of lights hanging above their heads, then the door they had entered through. Twin nods responded to his gesticulations.

The cauldrons and beakers holding the potions exploded, showering half the group with its contents at the same time that Harry’s spell caused the lights to spark, go off and fall on their heads. There were screams of outrage and fear as the men and women who had been doused in the potions suffered their combined effects while the others nursed cuts and brushed glass of their robes.

Harry darted to the exit, but he was spotted by one of the Unspeakables who jabbed her wand at the wall. The door melted off the wall and fell to the ground in a black puddle, leaving in its place pristine white cement. Harry whirled around to see the entire room had been subjected to the same treatment, effectively leaving them no way in or out.

Eight of the eleven witches and wizards had recovered enough to start opening fire on Harry, Remus and Sirius as the three men darted in opposite directions and forced the Aurors and Unspeakables to pick a target.

The fighting resumed just like it had in the Hall of Prophecies, only this time Harry noticed a marked difference in the Aurors’ fighting style. He could currently say, with confidence, that they had been holding back before and now that their objective had changed from capture to elimination, they did not bother pulling back their punches.

Dodging a nasty looking orange spell, Harry glanced up just in time to put up a shield in order to avoid what he suspected to be a powerful Conjunctivitis Curse aimed his way. His eyes darted to his left and spotted Remus holding his own, but struggling against two Aurors. Harry saw Sirius about to go over to assist him, but he was intercepted by a witch who jumped in his way and engaged him in a duel.
Sirius pointed his wand at the woman and shot her with a spell which soaked her to the bone in ice cold water. She yelped and sputtered out a string of profanities so long, Sirius felt himself reluctantly impressed by her.

He was getting ready to finish her off, a few well placed curses would have her down for the count long enough that he could concentrate on the two Aurors inching closer to him, when the witch did something which froze the words on his tongue. Her hair turned from dark brown to bubblegum pink to blood red without a word falling from her lips.

She was a Metamorphmagus and there were not that very many left in the wizarding world. In fact, he'd only ever met a single one in his lifetime and if his math was not wrong, she'd be right about the same age as this witch, too.

“Nymphy,” he whispered.

So shocked was he by this revelation that he was nearly hit by the next spell his determined cousin threw at him.

They engaged in a battle of wills and power, Sirius making sure not to hit her with any dangerous spells whilst Nymphadora Tonks was doing her best to bring down the thief that had broken into the Department of Mysteries underneath her very nose. Sirius blanched when the two Aurors waiting on the sidelines decided to join in on the fight and he redoubled his efforts.

Not too far away from where the pair were duelling, Remus held in a yelp as a spell came too close for his liking. He was losing his touch, it seemed. He returned fire tenfold and watched in satisfaction as his spells hit their marks and the two wizards went down with a heavy thump.

He stole a second to catch his breath and chance a look around him. Sirius was still fighting the three Aurors and Harry was off on the opposite side of the room struggling to hold back an Auror and two Unspeakables. Remus thought that the very fact that he was still standing was proof enough of what a powerful wizard Harry was on his path to becoming.

Remus took note of the wizards attacking Harry. They were trying to surround him and overwhelm him in numbers, but what Harry lacked in practice and spell knowledge he made up for with quick reflexes and good instinct. He was doing an admirable job of keeping them at bay and yet, as Remus observed the wizards grow impatient and change the nature of their spells to a more dangerous variety, he knew it was only a matter of time before they overwhelmed the boy.

Remus was a handful of steps away from one of the wizards when an errant spell dashed past his nose, quickly followed by another and another. The werewolf ducked as a curse came close to decapitating him and turned to watch the wizard who was causing all the chaos.

It was one of the Aurors that had been caught in the potion spill they had rigged. His eyes had grown to three times their size and were swelled shut with a purple pus which also covered his mouth and ears. The man was in a blind panic and was shooting off spells in all directions.

“Stupefy!” said Remus.

The wizard fell into a boneless heap, but not before two of his spells collided with the ceiling.

There was a great clap of thunder as the spells cracked the ceiling and then a groan as the beams failed to hold the structure together and the whole thing collapsed—onto Harry and his duellers.

“HARRY!”
Remus didn’t know if his scream was heard, or if Harry had a chance to protect himself as the ceiling fell on him. The werewolf jumped out of the way of the falling rubble and erected a shield around himself for protection. His entire body was coiled in tension as he waited for the dust to settle.

Although he knew better, he still felt like time stopped for the seconds which came after the explosion. He couldn’t see anything other than the wall of dust settling over half the room, he couldn’t hear anything other than the sound of his own blood rushing to his head and he couldn’t think past the mountain of rubble slowly coming into focus and what he was likely to find underneath it.

In short, he was a perfectly docile target.

The scream which wrenched itself from the depths of his lungs caught him by surprise, as did the curse which opened up his back in three clean cuts running down his spine. The pain brought him to his knees and the action must have been enough to satisfy his attacker for Remus was given time to perform a quick Healing Spell which closed the deepest of abrasions and halted the bleeding.

Shirt sticking to his skin and body humming from the shock of the injury, Remus felt a clawing in the bottom of his stomach. His werewolf—the one he kept chained and starved in the deepest part of himself—was shaking himself awake. And he thirsted for violence. He wanted vengeance.

For once, the wizard agreed.
Harry awoke slowly. He didn't know if he was truly awake at first. His eyes struggled to pry themselves open, squinting against the dust floating in the air and the scraps of light which were just enough for him to make out the hole he found himself in. Memories began to come back to him and he made the mistake of physically wincing at the onslaught and nearly got himself impaled on an ankle-thick wire sticking straight up from the ground.

Disoriented and hurting everywhere, Harry shifted where he was lying. He still couldn't see anything, but he had enough room to raise his arms chest high and feel around his limited space.

As his hands scrabbled clumsily for his wand, he took stock of his body through physical feeling alone. His head throbbed in time with the pulse beating in his eyes and his upper body felt like it had been put through several scores of stampeding centaurs. As in spite of that, it was his legs which had him worried the most.

Buried and trapped under a slab of cement larger than two grown men, Harry's legs were incapable of carrying out any sort of movement and were, in fact, alarmingly numb. He feared the worst.

As though from a distance, he could hear shouted spells, shrill screams and echoing explosions resuming in the rest of the room. Harry couldn't discern his godfather or Remus' voices from the others fighting, but just the fact that the struggle continue on the other side--that there was someone left for the Aurors to fight--reassured him in a small way.

The index finger of his right hand bumped into something smooth and curiously warm. A trickle of excitement rushed to Harry's head as he scrambled to reach his wand, pulling and pushing on his fresh injuries until his fingers finally closed around the familiar stick of holly.

The first thing Harry did was to cast a charm Sirius had taught him during one of their lessons. It was an extremely useful charm for duels and battle situations, Sirius had explained, because it served to temporarily numb the pain from the caster's injuries and allow him to keep fighting. Remus had been the one to also point out the dangers of such a charm: if the injury was internal, or sustained in a critical area, casting the charm and proceeding to move around would only do him more harm than good and without the pain to signal to him when to stop, he'd be swapping one death for another.

There was no time to waste, though. Harry performed the charm on himself and breathed a harsh sigh of relief as the cooling sensation washed away the burning agony. Mind considerably more clear, he considered his options for escape. If he had Dumbledore’s knowledge and skill, he could transfigure the rubble to something else—confetti, balloons, feathers, anything—and simply burrow his way out.

But he wasn't Dumbledore and after three years of following his instincts and trusting his friends, Harry was (relatively) confident he could find a way out of this one.

His legs had to be freed one way or another and since he couldn't feel anything other than a dull pressure from them, he would have to make sure that nothing else collapsed on top of him as a result of getting rid of the slab of concrete. He wasn't certain he was in any condition to move away. An idea came to him then, one crazy enough to actually work. He cast a shield over his upper body and stuck his arm through the protective film.

"Tunnelus!"
Rings of destructive power erupted from his wand. They decimated the fallen ceiling in seconds as the spell cleared a tunnel to the surface right above Harry’s legs. The piece holding him down broke at the pressure and Harry was glad he’d thought to protect himself when chunks from the slab bounced off the magical shield.

A column of light nearly blinded him as the spell served its purpose and opened up a tunnel to the outside world.

Harry determinedly grit his teeth and pushed himself up on his elbows, only then realizing that he was still wearing his backpack when the back of his arms rubbed against the rough fabric. Sensation was starting to creep back into his legs, making Harry almost wish for the warm nothingness that had scared him like nothing else.

A shake, some pokes, and a basic diagnostic spell later, he’d established he didn’t have any truly debilitating wounds and began to crawl up the makeshift escape tunnel. At the top, his nails broke against stone and his fingers bled as he clawed at the mouth of the tunnel to widen the opening.

His head broke through the surface. Finally. He had seconds to bask in the glory of his triumph, to allow his hands some rest after they’d struggled to pull him out, before the pile underneath him shifted with a sigh and came loose. Like adding water to a sandcastle, the walls of the tunnel fell apart, stole their snug hold on his body, and sent him hurtling down a mountain of destruction.

The fall lit the match in the dark room where he’d stored away his pain. It came rushing back with a vengeance. Sweat, dirt and blood coated his face in rivulets of brown. His hands shook but the Pain-Relieving Charm he cast on himself soothed the pangs from his injuries to the point that he was able to roll onto his front, push to his feet and hobble to a forgotten corner of the room.

Sirius and Remus were fighting two people each. They stood on opposite sides of the room facing each other while their adversaries had their backs together and easily parried the spells thrown at them. As Harry watched, one of the wizards fighting Remus lost his patience and advanced on the werewolf with a shout at his partner to cover him.

Next thing Harry knew, the floor underneath the man’s feet turned to liquid and swallowed him up to his neck. A zipper replaced his lips and with a snick of sound, it sealed itself shut. His partner was left to fend off Remus alone and to Harry, it didn’t look like the werewolf needed any help.

Sirius was having less luck. He was facing off with a short man wearing a bulky Auror’s coat and a woman with electric blue hair. The two Aurors were giving it their all, they barely granted Sirius time to breathe between each assault and yet, as Harry observed their duel closer, he noticed a pattern in the witch’s spellcasting. After seven offensive spells in a row, she’d take a second or two longer to fire off the next round. She wasn’t hesitating, the magic was taking its toll on her body and she needed to take that small break.

What bothered Harry was that if he had been able to recognize that point of weakness, his godfather was bound to have seen it as well and yet he never used it. Sirius was holding back, but the cut the woman had just opened up on Sirius’ thigh proved to Harry that she wasn’t nearly as reserved herself.

Sirius volleyed back his own spells and she side-stepped to the right to avoid them while her partner covered her. She took two more steps to the right and inadvertently placed herself on the line of sight exactly between Harry and Sirius.

“Stupefy!”
The blue-haired woman didn’t even realize it as the spell came for her from behind and hit her square
on the back, effectively knocking her out.

The smack of her lax body hitting the ground called on the two men duelling metres away from her. Harry decided to use the Auror’s surprise to his advantage. The man was caught off guard but he was able to dodge and deflect Harry’s spells in good order. In his preoccupation with the new player added to the mix, he forgot about Sirius.

The short wizard joined his fallen companion on the floor of the battlefield. The dust hadn’t even settled around his body before the last Unspeakable was thrown down next to him and left in no condition to get up again.

“Merlin’s saggy balls, Harry!” Sirius exclaimed, pulling his godson in for a bone crushing hug. “I thought you were dead,” he choked out.

“I might still be if you keep squeezing me like that,” coughed Harry, reluctantly pulling away from the hug to clutch at his throbbing ribs.

“I saw the roof fall on your head. The wizard responsible—I took him out, but two of his spells flew loose and I didn’t react fast enough. I…” Remus pressed his lips together. “I couldn’t even stay to pull you out, and I tried but—”

“Moony, you’re mad if you think I even blame one bit for what happened. Same goes for you, too,” Harry said to Sirius. “You warned me about what I was getting into if I tagged along and granted, I didn’t think I would end up buried under two metres of rock and metal,” he joked, “but I knew anyway.”

Personally, Sirius disagreed with his godson’s assessment but he took one look at the boy and said, “We can talk some other time. I think we’ve extended our visitation right at the Ministry. Do you still have the prophecy?”

“No one touched the backpack.”

“Good, then lets go before—”

The room sunk into darkness. The blue flames in the torches turned red as a deafening siren blared its horn into the room.

“—that happens.”

Remus ran to the liquified doors on the floor but no amount of wand waving or ingenious Latin could get them to retake their positions on the walls.

“We’re trapped,” he said. “The doors aren’t cooperating—I don’t know enough about the magic they used here to even begin to reverse it—and the wards on the room make it impossible for any witch or wizard to…” Harry had stopped listening. He had an idea.

“DOBBY!”

The house-elf popped into existence wearing a yellow tutu, blue rain boots and a red floral beanie with holes cut out for his ears.

“Harry Potter called on Dobby! Dobby came as soon as he felt his Master’s call,” he chirped. “But Harry Potter is hurt. You should have called Dobby sooner, he has much experience with wizard wounds and knows many countercurses and potions for Dark Magics, too.”
“Dobby, you can do that later. Right now we need you to take us out of here before the rest of the Auror department finds us,” Harry rushed out. “Can you do that?”

Harry thought the house-elf was caught somewhere between looking insulted his abilities were being questioned and mortified that he even allowed himself such thoughts.

“Of course, Harry Potter sir. Dobby will save Mr. Potter any time after what he did for Dobby. Dobby owes Harry Potter everything, he does. Where does Harry Potter wish to go?”

“Grimmauld Place. It’s—”

Dobby snapped his fingers once and the three wizards were pulled to his side. He snapped them again and Harry saw the room shrink and converge on a single point until it was swallowed up like a black hole and they were pulled in with it.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

They arrived at Grimmauld Place's sitting room three seconds later.

Sighing in relief, Harry stumbled over to the closest armchair and sank into it with a pained groan.

“Harry Potter is hurt,” tutted Dobby. “Harry Potter should take better care of himself, there is only one of him in the world.” And with that, Dobby clicked his fingers once more and disappeared with a pop.

Remus and Sirius approached where Harry was sitting and immediately started running the more complex diagnostic spells they knew. They frowned.

“Lots of cuts and bruises,” muttered Remus.

“I could’ve told you that much,” Harry groaned.

“It looks like your left side took the brunt of the impact when you were buried under the fallen ceiling,” Remus continued. “You have a couple of broken ribs, the rest are just severely bruised. There’s also something with your head…”

“Mild concussion, I think,” said Sirius, “I got too many of them myself back in the old days not to recognize one when I see it. Your left shoulder seems to be out of sorts as well. I’d say it’s on the verge of being dislocated if we don’t do something about it, you’ll have to wear a sling for a couple of days.”

“Does that mean I get a break from training?” asked Harry.

Sirius snorted and said, “Maybe from me but you’ll have to talk to Ms Hansforth and Moony about their lessons.”

Another pop sounded in the room and Dobby came forward with an assortment of bottles held in his arms. Remus went to take them from him and together they arranged them on the coffee table.

“Mister Lupin is too kind to Dobby,” said the elf, refusing to look up from his inspection of the potion labels.

“What are those for?” asked Harry.

“These are healing potions that Dobby has brought for Harry Potter to help with his injuries,” explained the elf.
“Did you make these yourself?” Sirius picked up one of the bottles and examined it closely.

“No no, Dobby borrowed them from Madame Pomfrey's office at Hogwarts. Dobby has been working there since Harry Potter freed him from the evil Malfoys—” Dobby slapped a hand over his mouth, his huge eyes rounded in shock and fear. The house-elf abruptly turned on his heel and tripped over his own feet as he made a dash for the fire crackling in the fireplace.

Harry cursed. With a painful heave, he stumbled up from his chair and grabbed Dobby by the frills of his skirt. Though small and scrawny, the elf continued to struggle in his grasp with surprising force and without the numbing effect of the Pain-Relieving Charm, Harry felt every one of the elf’s struggles on his own battered body until he let out a wheezing hiss through clenched teeth which froze the elf in his tracks.

“Dobby has hurt Harry Potter,” cried the house-elf. “Mister Potter was only trying to stop Dobby and now he is worse pain than before. How can he ever forgive Dobby?”

“You saved us from dozens of Aurors bent on sending us to Azkaban and worse, then you brought us here and sto-borrowed these potions so that I would get better. I think, with everything you’ve done for me just in the past ten minutes, it should be no problem for me to forgive you.”

Dobby was too choked up for words, his tennis ball eyes brimming with fresh tears as he gazed up at the young wizard who had saved him from his previous masters and shown him more kindness and compassion than he had ever known. Dobby’s ears flapped against his beanie as he twirled around and wordlessly began measuring and mixing the potions.

“What was that about?” whispered Sirius.

“Dobby has this habit of punishing himself when he thinks he’s done something wrong,” Harry told him. “He just has to realize that since he’s a free elf,” he directed those pointed words at Dobby, “he doesn’t have to worry about insulting the Malfoys—his former masters.”

“Harry Potter is right, Dobby will try to be better,” said Dobby contritely.

“It looks like you’re in capable hands, Harry. Healing Magic has never been our expertise so it’s a good thing we have Dobby here to take care of you. In the meantime, I think Padfoot and I should take care of our own scrapes and such,” Remus suggested.

“Dobby has also brought Murtlap Essence from Hogwarts,” the elf chimed in cheerfully, “it will help with cuts and bruises. There is enough for everyone.”

Sirius was impressed. He bent down to be eye level with the house-elf and said very clearly, “Thank you, Dobby, you are a very good house-elf.”

Dobby’s entire face turned a darker shade of his normal skin colour, including his ears, and Harry noted with interest that this was probably how blushing manifested itself in elves.

After Sirius and Remus had left the room, Harry finally let go of his composure and allowed all his injuries to be felt. He didn't think there was a single place in his body that was not throbbing in agony.

He heard the elf muttering to himself as he got the remedies organized, “Harry Potter should not be hurt... too risky, needs to be more careful... still growing into his magic... will take some time...”

A shake of his shoulder encouraged him to open his eyes to slits and take the potion Dobby offered him without question.
He must have been given at least five different bottles before he felt drowsiness overpower him. The last thing he felt was a light pressure pushing on the back of his legs, arms and torso, like falling on a bed of bubbles, as he was levitated in the air by elvish magic.

---

Frank Bryce, an ex-soldier returned from the army sixty years ago, woke up with a sudden start as pain radiating from his leg pulled him away from the land of dreams. He puffed in annoyance as he snaked a hand down the bed to grasp at his aching limb. He'd taken a hit during the war all those years ago and the pain from that injury still bothered him like it had only happened the day before and not decades ago.

Tossing the covers aside, he clumsily got to his feet and padded over to his bedroom door where he kept his faithful walking stick. Positioning it to support his leg, Frank limped to the small kitchen in his makeshift cottage and took his time lighting a candle to turn on the stove and put some water to boil for midnight tea.

It was as he was setting the kettle down that some light emanating from outside caught his attention. Squinting against the darkness, Frank felt a wave of anger hit him like a freight-train as he realized what he was looking at.

Some rowdy, misbehaved teenagers must've stolen their way into the Riddle House again, only this time had the audacity to start a bonfire while he was asleep not twenty five metres away. He turned off the fire one the stove and grabbed a jacket from the closet next to the door. Limping outside, he grumbled on the path to the back door of the decrepit old mansion.

As he fished out the keys from his inside pocket he was taken back in his memories to a time when this same house had stood tall, proud and beautiful amongst all the other, more simplistic, houses that littered Little Hangleton, England. That had been way back fifty years ago when the Riddles, an affluent family consisting of an elderly couple and their adult son, had lived in the house.

Not surprisingly, the Little Hangletons in the village still referred to it as the Riddle House despite the number of different owners it had had since the Riddles' sudden and mysterious death. For those old enough to remember what had happened fifty years ago, they took pleasure in discussing the case with the younger generation, spinning the same tale in so many different patterns that nowadays it was impossible to tell what the real version was anymore.

But Frank knew what had happened.

Fifty years ago on a warm summer's night the Riddles had sat down in their dining room to enjoy a minor feast for dinner. Frank had been eating his own meat stew in his cottage when he spotted a teenage boy with dark hair and fair skin walking up the path to the Riddle home. He'd rung the bell, Frank presumed, for the door had opened instantly as he got to the porch. Nothing interesting had happened after that, the Riddles got many visitors to their home on a daily basis so Frank had thought nothing of it and had continued devouring his stew with gusto.

It was the next morning when one of the maids had walked into the drawing room to perform her daily cleaning tasks, that she'd stumbled upon the sight of the three Riddles. Dead. Their eyes had been wide open, their faces contorted in an expression of horror and their bodies unmarked.

She'd immediately run screaming out the door, shouting to all the villager who would listen and rousing those who weren't.

"It's the Riddles! They're dead! Lying there with their eyes all open! Still in their dinner clothes!"
The villagers had crowded the woman and demanded to hear the details of what had happened. They cared not for the Riddle family, no one did, so none of them bothered with faking grief when there was a much more exciting mystery to behold.

The police had surrounded the mansion and taken the bodies away. For days speculation ran wild in the village as to who could have been the cold blooded killer. It wasn't until Frank Bryce—the Riddle's gardener for some considerable years—was arrested that the villagers finally had their answer.

Though some had been reluctant at first to believe such horrible allegations of the former army soldier, public pressure of opinion soon had everyone convinced that the police had arrested the right man. It therefore came as a shock to all when Frank was let go on grounds that the police had no evidence to tie him to the crime other than the fact that he lived on the grounds and had a key to the mansion's back door.

The medical report on the bodies of the Riddles had come back completely clean. No poison in their systems, they weren't bludgeoned, stabbed, suffocated, shot, strangled, or even harmed at all. The coroner had reported—in a rather bewildered tone—that the Riddles had all been in perfect health and the only thing to note about their bodies was how their faces seemed to have been fixed in fright.

But the police were forced to acknowledge that that information was useless – after all, whoever had heard of someone being frightened to death?

To this day the villagers of Little Hangleton still considered Frank to be the guilty culprit but he spent his days tending to the gardens of the mansion and rarely ventured out of the property so he paid them no mind.

The house had fallen to ruins since then; roof tiles had fallen off, ivy had crawled its way to the surface and most windows had been shattered through by teenagers throwing rocks at them from their bicycles as they passed by. Nothing of its old grandeur had survived.

He reached the door that was almost completely covered in ivy and put the key in the lock. By some grand miracle the hinges made no sound as he pushed the door and entered the expansive kitchen. It had been a long time since he'd been inside these walls but he remembered the way nonetheless and groped around for the next door that would lead him further into the house.

Reaching it, he opened it slowly and walked out into the hallway. Off to his right he could see a sliver of golden light casting a light shadow on the dark and dirty flooring. Not wanting to spook the kids before he got a chance to really scare them himself, Frank tried his hardest not to make a sound as he approached the narrow gap that stood between the open door and the wall. Little puffs of dust billowed out from where his feet hit the ground and he had to fight the uncontrollable urge to sneeze and blow his cover.

Frank inched closer and closer to the door. He peeked through the small gap. Surprisingly enough, the light he had seen coming from inside the room belonged to a fire that had been lit in the grate. He was just about to barge into the room to disrupt whatever shenanigans those vandals were up to when the timid voice of a man speaking caught his attention. It sound fearful and distressed.

“There is a little more in the bottle, My lord, if you are still hungry.”

“Later,” responded another voice. This one was different. Whereas the first voice had been timid and submissive, this one held a tone of dominance and power despite the apparent strain that the speaker must've been under. This voice encouraged fear and was cold like a winter's night. “Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail.”
Stepping closer, Frank caught the vision of a small, pudgy man in a long, black robe approaching a heavy looking chair. The sound of wood scraping against wood filled the room as the small man pushed the chair closer to the roaring fire.

“Where is Nagini?” asked the icy voice.

“I-don’t-know, My Lord. She set out to explore the house, I think...” he trailed off in a quiet whisper and let out what sounded like a whimper.

“You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail. I will need feeding in the night,” said the second voice. “The journey has tired me greatly.” A pause followed, then the one named Wormtail spoke again.

“My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?”

“A week. Perhaps longer,” a terrible silence followed this statement. “It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over.”

Certain that his old age had finally caught up to him in the form of impaired hearing (there's no such word as Quidditch), Frank shook his head to get rid of any cobwebs and pressed even closer to the door.

“The-the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?” Wormtail squeaked out. “Pray, forgive me, but why should we wait until the World Cup is over?”

“Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. No, we must wait.”

Clearly these people were either spy or criminals as they were speaking in some sort of code that Frank could not stand to decipher. But one thing was clear, they were planning something. Something big.

“Your Lordship is still determined, then?” said Wormtail quietly.

“Certainly I am determined, Wormtail.” There was a hidden warning in the voice that Frank could not help but take notice of.

There was a pause, then Wormtail's words started to mesh together, so hurried was he to get the statement out that his words tripped over each other.

“It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord.”

A deeper pause followed.

“Without Harry Potter?” the other voice hissed out. “I see...”

“My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!” he exclaimed. As his voice kept rising, his words spilled out faster. “The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard—any wizard who wasn't as well protected—this could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave for a little while, I could be back here in as little as two days with a more suitable candidate—”

“I could use another wizard,” said the cold voice, “that is true... I do wonder...”
“Yes, My Lord?” squeaked Wormtail excitedly.

“Could this generous,” the dangerous emphasis on that word made the hairs on the back of Frank’s neck stand on end, “suggestion on your part be a clumsy and ill begotten attempt to desert me?”

“My Lord!” Wormstail's voice rose squeakily. “I—I have no wish to leave you, none at all—”

“Do not lie to me!” hissed the other voice. “I can always tell, Worntail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me! I revolt you. I see the way you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me...”

“No! My devotion to Your Lordship—”

“Is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. I cannot survive without you, when I need to be fed every few hours. Who is to milk Nagini?”

“But you seem so much stronger, My—”

“Silence! I am no stronger than I was before, a few days without your clumsy care and I would be robbed of the little health I have gained.”

Wormtail had stuttered his way into silence at the other man's hissed shout. The cackling of the fire was all that could be heard for a while.

“I have my reasons for using the boy. I have already explained myself to you and I will not venture into the matter once again. As for the protection surrounding the boy, my plan will prove successful nonetheless. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Worntail— courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath—”

“My Lord, I must speak!” Panic was easy to distinguish in his voice now. “Bertha Jorkins' disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I kill—”

“If?” Whispered the other voice. “If you follow the plan, Worntail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. I wish I could do it myself, but I am in no condition... Come, Worntail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. By that time, my faithful servant will have rejoined us—”

“I am a faithful servant!” sulked Wormtail.

A cold, indifferent laugh followed this statement and Frank could not focus on what was said next. His path was clear now. He had to get out of the mansion unnoticed and alert the police to the plans of these madmen. This Harry Potter boy's life depended on him doing so. They'd already killed someone else—a woman—and he had no doubt that they would do it again.

The cold voice pierced through Frank's thoughts once again and, against his better judgement, he stayed put and listened to what was being said.

“One more murder... my faithful servant at Hogwarts... Harry Potter is as good as mine, Worntail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. Be quiet... I think I hear Nagini...”

At this, the second man's voice changed. He started making odd hissing and spitting sounds that Frank had never heard before.

Suddenly, Frank felt a presence behind him. He turned to look and froze in his spot at the sight before him. There, slithering across the dark floor and towards the door he was standing at, was an
enormous snake. Its undulating body kept coming ever closer, sweat was building up on Frank’s forehead and the man had to fight with himself not to let his walking stick fall from his slippery hands.

Fortunately, the slithering reptile seemed to not have noticed he was there and kept on its path to the spitting and hissing noises coming from the lit room. When the tip of its tail had passed the doorway, Frank released a relieved breath of air.

He’d reacted too soon.

“Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail,” said the cold voice.

“In-indeed, My Lord,” sputtered Wormtail.

“Indeed, yes. According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say.”

Frank was given no time to hide himself from sight. Fast footsteps were heard approaching the door before it was flung open.

A man stood quivering in front of Frank. He had a pointy nose, a small amount of greying hair to cover his round head, beady, watery eyes and a grimace on his face. The short man's eyes widened upon spotting Frank and a bead of sweat appeared on top of his head to run down his forehead.

“Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?” mocked the high-pitched voice from inside the room.

The submissive did nothing except open the door even wider, gesturing for Frank to walk inside with a trembling hand that held an oddly shaped stick.

Frank's eyes sped back and forth, taking in every detail of the situation he was in, trying to find a way out so that he could alert the authorities. However, that plan was quickly shot down as he felt something warm and slippery slither over his shoe. Too afraid to look down, the old man realized that they had him effectively cornered and cursed himself for not having bade his exit when he had the chance.

Walking forward on unsteady legs, the unidentified man spoke to him from his chair.

“You heard everything, Muggle?” it spat.

“What's that you're callin’ me?” said Frank defiantly. Some of his courage started to make an unexpected appearance but he gripped onto it with debilitating strength.

“I'm calling you a Muggle. It means that you are not a wizard,” informed the voice.

“I don't know what you mean by wizard. But I do know enough to inform the authorities about you lot. You've done murder and you're plannin’ more!” Sudden inspiration hit Frank and he announced, “I'll tell you something else, my wife knows I'm here and if I don't come back—”

“You have no wife,” interrupted the evil hiss. “You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows... he always knows....”

Frank bristled at being called a liar, even though it was true. But he couldn't possibly know that.

“Lord, is it?” he snarked. “Well, I don’t think much of your tone, My Lord. In fact, your manners are
poorly lacking, why don't you turn around and face me like a real man?"

“But I am not a man, Muggle,” whispered the cold voice, “I am much, much more than a man. However... why not? I will face you... Wormtail, come turn my chair around.”

The servant gave a pathetic whimper and screwed up his face in obvious disgust and reluctance. Not wanting to anger his master, the little man scurried over to the chair and grunted with the effort it took to turn it around.

The snake at Frank's feet had slithered to stay in front of him, it shot its head up in the air and let out a low hiss, it's forked tongue sticking out of its mouth.

All of a sudden, the chair was facing Frank. His cane clattered to the ground. His heart sped up, his head started throbbing, his palms got sweaty. He could hear a terrified scream off in the distance as he stood staring at the-the... thing in front of him. The aching of his throat told him it was him that was screaming so loud.

There was a flash of green light and Frank Bryce crumpled to the ground. His heart had stopped long before his body hit the dirty floor. He was dead.

Three hundred miles away Harry Potter woke up with a start.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

Stretching along the bed, Harry yawned far and wide and cracked open his sleep crusted eyes. He was in his bedroom in Grimmauld Place. He relaxed back onto his pillow and dutifully ignored the itch in the back of his mind which was pushing him to remember something important.

His right arm reached out to grab his glasses from his bedside table. A bump followed by a muttered curse was heard in the room as he doubled over in pain and nursed his red forearm.

No matter how rude of a wakeup call, the pain helped clear his mind and he started to recall what had happened the day before. Still moving a bit sluggishly, he propped his glasses on his face and disentangled himself from the sheets to go to the bathroom.

He went through the process of relieving himself and washing his hands and face without issue save some pangs of discomfort. It was when he placed his glasses back on and caught his reflection on the mirror that his limited thoughts whirred to a halt.

His face was a kindergartner's attempt at fingerpainting the night sky, his skin was splashed with black, blue and purple with streaks of deep red and angry pink where gashes had been carved into the mesh of bruises. The image only extended to the tops of his shoulders and as he stepped back, he started the fun game of matching each injury to the duels and incidents of the day before.

Harry poked at his shoulder with a finger and breathed in sharply as the harmless action incited a lighting bolt of agony which spread all around his shoulder and up his neck. He didn’t bother putting on a shirt as he walked out of the room and headed straight to the kitchen.

Halfway down the stairs his steps were interrupted by a searing pain from the scar on his forehead which blinded him and forced him to come to a stop. He winced and pressed a finger against it, willing the ache to fade away. His memories of the dream he’d just had—or rather his vision, as he now preferred to call it—came to the forefront of his mind once more. He resolved to share what he’d seen as soon as he found Sirius or Remus and resumed shuffling down the stairs.

Harry was not the least bit surprised to find Dobby manning the stove like a professional chef and
dishing out eggs and sausages like a well trained army cook. He shook his head at the tiny elf and felt a warm stirring in his chest as he regarded the small creature who had done so much for him and asked for nothing in return.

“Master Harry Potter, sir! You’re awake!” Dobby let go of the spatula in his hand, where it stayed hovering in the air, and rushed toward Harry’s side, wrapping himself around Harry’s legs in an attempt at a hug.

He quickly pulled away when he realized what he had done and the tell-tale blush Harry had observed the night before blossomed on his round cheeks. The small creature dropped his head to stare at the dark floor as he twisted his hands in front of himself.

Anticipating Dobby's descent into another one of his self-flagellation episodes, Harry spoke up.

“It's good to see you too, Dobby. And thank you again, for everything you did for us.” Harry took a look around himself and added: “And continue to do for us apparently.”

The chair groaned under his weight as he settled himself down while Dobby plopped a plate down in front of him piled high with all types of food. Harry dug in with the appropriate gusto, only moderately slowed down by the pain in his shoulder and ribs and he was more than halfway done by the time Sirius and Remus made an appearance.

After a brief discussion about who should be tasked to do the dishes—Dobby insisted on doing them himself but the others argued that it was Kreacher’s turn to do something around the house—Harry asked for his godfather and Remus’ attention as he prepared what he had to tell them.

“Last night I had a dream,” he started, “about Voldemort and when I woke up, my scar was hurting. In the dream...”

Harry told them everything that had happened. He scavenged through his memory for every single detail in case one of them held some special significance to them but nothing seemed to clue them in as to who the special servant could be.

Though Sirius and Remus wanted nothing less than to dismiss what Harry was telling them as nothing more than a strange and detailed dream, their belief in him never wavered and a reminder of the prophecy striked through any lingering doubts.

An unnatural stillness followed the end of Harry’s speech. Sirius and Remus were deep in their own thoughts. Harry felt like he knew exactly what they were thinking. Here, finally, they had conclusive proof that the prophecy was true. Voldemort was coming back. Soon.

“Harry Potter will defeat him again,” whispered Dobby.

Harry whirled around in surprise to see Dobby by the kitchen sink, holding a white cloth in his hands and twisting it around thoughtfully. The elf seemed to be trembling on the spot and Harry found himself both curious and terrified to find out what had happened to the house-elves during Voldemort’s reign of terror.

“He will,” said the elf. “Harry Potter will fight the Dark Lord and win again. He will protect everyone.”

In the face of Dobby’s unwavering faith, Harry fought with himself to hold the elf’s gaze as he felt his breath knocked out of him. The weight he’d been carrying ever since he first heard of the prophecy—no, ever since Voldemort broke into his family’s home and marked Harry in an unspeakable way... That weight shifted, trembled, and settled on his shoulders with a sigh.
Chapter 10

The day before...

Of the two men in front of her, Amelia Bones could not decide which one she was more disappointed in.

Francis Cindersnatch, a twenty-five year decorated Auror, had been the one in charge of the raid on the Department of Mysteries that very same day. Said raid had been put together after an alarm in the Hall of Prophecies had gone off and alerted the Unspeakables to a breach in their department.

Madame Bones hadn’t believed it when she’d been informed. To break into the Ministry of Magic was supposed to be difficult to the point of unachievable. To break into the Department of Mysteries was supposed to be simply impossible and yet, someone—and not just someone, a group of someones—had managed to do it.

She had reacted immediately and sent a squad of thirty men and women down to the Department of Mysteries to take care of the situation, thinking that under these unforeseen circumstances, she could not be faulted for erring on the side of caution. At least, that is what Amelia had been led to believe when first told what had happened, which had been two hours ago whilst the intruders had still been in the building.

She took her wand in hand and lightly tapped it against the palm of her hand. A tingle went up her arm. For a moment, it distracted her from her thoughts. A glance from underneath her eyelashes at the two wizards standing stock-still on the other side of her desk and her thoughts came crashing back.

These two men were not the only the highest authority to be found in the task force sent to the Department of Mysteries, they were also the only two who had not required a trip to the oncall medical station to be revived or treated for injuries. Amelia knew Francis Cindersnatch, they had started at the Auror Academy together and she knew what a talented wizard he was which was why she had trusted him in leading the twenty Auror force. Twenty-one Aurors went into the Department of Mysteries and only one of them could stand before her.

The second man in front of her was an Unspeakable, the Head of his sector at the Department of Mysteries—of which she was still unauthorized access to—and one of the unfortunate Ministry workers that had been on the other side of the raid. She had no knowledge of how long this particular Unspeakable had been under Ministry employment and knew next to nothing about the man himself; including what he actually looked like as it was one of the requirements of the job.

Luckily for the Ministry of Magic as a whole, no one had suffered any injuries that couldn't be fixed with a few standard spells so there had been no reason to alert St. Mungo's on the situation, it would have undoubtedly gotten back to the press somehow and then Amelia would have been forced to deal with a whole new issue at hand.

“This is the Ministry of Magic,” she began coolly. “This building represents the foundation of magical law and we are the ones charged with upholding it. We are the ones in charge of making sure that all of our citizens feel safe as they step out of their homes because they have the knowledge that nothing will happen to them as long as we are on the lookout. It is bad enough that every year less and less candidates show up for Auror training but now you are telling me that we can’t even handle a simple break in to one of our departments? That such a feat was even possible is outrageous, but to expect me to accept that our team of Aurors and Unspeakables couldn’t even
apprehend those criminals?"

She had slowly been rising from her chair, hands flat on her desk as she leaned over forward and levelled the two men with her iciest of glares. Auror Cindersnatch had the decency to shift uncomfortably on his feet whereas the Unspeakable calmly returned her stare. Her wand was gripped tightly in hand and shot off sparks the more agitated she became.

“Explain to me again how of the twenty-one Aurors and… How many Unspeakables?”

“I am not at liberty to say, madam,” said the Unspeakable.

“How could me knowing the number of Unspeakables who participated in this matter possibly harm your department’s secrecy?” demanded a bewildered Madame Bones.

“Respectfully, Madame Bones, I don’t know. I’m simply following orders from my superiors,” the Unspeakable shrugged his shoulders.

“I am the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” she said.

“I understand, madam, and I apologize for this inconvenience but I must still deny you the information.”

Madame Bones pursed her lips like she had just bit into a lemon but did not push the matter further.

“Very well, then. Tell me how these wizards got away.”

“I had divided the task force into two groups, madame. I believed that with twelve witches and wizards it would be more than enough to contain the threat in the Hall of Prophecies.” Auror Cindersnatch averted his eyes from Madame Bones and confessed, “It was the wrong call. The intruders got lucky and managed to evade and defeat the task force. We then believed we had them trapped after they fell through one of the Thief’s Holes. We surrounded them with the rest of the task force, including an unmentionable number of Unspeakables, but there was an explosion and they escaped.”

Years of political maneuvering had left Madame Bones with the ability to train her expressions into whichever one she desired. She listened to Auror Cindersnatch’s tale with a neutral look on her face; only a minute tremble of her fingers gave away the anger bubbling underneath the surface of her skin.

“What was their goal?” asked Madame Bones. “Why did they want access to the Hall of Prophecies?”

Auror Cindersnatch shrugged his shoulders and tilted his head in the Unspeakable’s direction. Madame Bones's eyes shifted to him.

“They were after a prophecy, madam,” the Unspeakable told her slowly, savouring the words on his tongue as though to check they were the right ones.

“And?” demanded Madame Bones. “Did they take it or not?”

“As far as we can tell, it was the removal of the prophecy from its shelving unit which alerted our department to the breach. Although it is possible that the prophecy was destroyed in the struggle, we cannot know for sure and as of yet, we have not been able to find it.” The Unspeakable drew strength from within and said, “It is our belief that they escaped with it in their possession.”
“How long will it take you to identify exactly what was stolen?”

“Despite our best efforts, a significant number of prophecies were destroyed as we—”

“How. Long.”

The Unspeakable swallowed uncomfortably. “Months, Madame Bones, if not a year.”

“I see.”

Madame Bones sunk down into her chair with calculated movements. She spread her hands on her desk, one of them resting on her wand, and remained silent for minutes.

Without warning, her head snapped up from where it had been hanging between her arms. She straightened her posture, narrowed her eyes at the two men and dared them to contradict her with her gaze.

“This is what we are going to do,” she began. “Only our two departments are aware this even happened and we are going to keep it that way. No talking to any friends, family, coworkers and especially not the press. The Unspeakables have made a profession out of keeping secrets, I’m sure one more won’t be a problem, will it?”

“No, madam,” the Unspeakable responded.

“Good. Auror Cindersnatch, can you confirm that at no point in time were civilians or employees in any danger of being harmed?”

“I-I suppose so, madam,” stammered the Auror, “but there is no way of knowing that for sure—”

“As I understand it, we wouldn’t even have known about the break in if the thieves hadn’t been successful in retrieving their prophecy in the first place. In fact, had the Department of Mysteries not chosen to alert us, our department would have been none the wiser.” Although Madame Bones had said her piece with a straight face, she couldn’t control the slight flaring of her nostrils and the red on her cheeks which showed just how unhappy she was at the thought.

“This matter will remain between our two departments until such a time as the Unspeakables can tell with certainty exactly which prophecy was stolen and whether its disappearance poses a threat to our people.” She bobbed her head to bring the point home and pulled out some papers out of her desk drawer. “Mr Unspeakable, if you so require it, I will have repairmen sent down to you to aid in the reconstruction of your department.”

“I thank you for your offer, madam, but I must decline.”

Madame Bones huffed under her breath and shook her head.

“If you must, then you must. You are dismissed, gentlemen.”

Madame Bones proceeded to put on her reading glasses, dip a feathered quill in blue ink and turn her attention to the pile of documents on her desk. The men took that as their queue and let themselves out.

As the click of the door reached her ears, the last of her strength left Madame Bones and she sagged onto her desk. She brought fingers up to massage her scalp and felt the pangs of an oncoming headache announcing themselves right on schedule. She toed off her heels, pulled out the pins from her hair and allowed herself a moment to drop the air of Madame Bones to just be Amelia.
As Amelia, she could finally lay her political obligations aside and really think about the latest crisis knocking on her door. It could not have arrived at a worse time. Preparations to host the Quidditch World Cup were well underway, it was a tremendous opportunity for magical Great Britain in all ways imaginable and it was up to her and committee of three other people to make sure everything went smoothly on the day.

Amelia entertained the thought that the break in could have been an attempt to sabotage the World Cup but quickly dismissed it before it could become anything more than idle thought. As it was, the crisis in the Department of Mysteries had been devastating in terms of security, but it had also been easily swept under the rug. If someone had wanted to sabotage the World Cup before it began, they could have easily chosen a more public venue which would no doubt have garnered the publicity they wanted.

The targeting of the Hall of Prophecies was too specific, Amelia decided. These thieves had a purpose in what they were doing, they carefully planned their mission and risked their lives and freedom to get what they were after and in the end, they were successful. They had known when to strike, where to go and how to escape.

All for a prophecy.

The chair swivelled in place and pointed Amelia to the wall where a moving picture drew her eyes. It was the first page of the Daily Prophet from November 1st 1981 placed inside an oak frame and protected from age and decay.

**WAR IS OVER**

**YOU KNOW WHO DEFEATED BY HARRY POTTER!**

Underneath the large, boxy announcement was a moving photograph of Diagon Alley, streets overflowing with wizards out in the middle of the day for the first time in years, smiles wider and hearts lighter than they had been in a very long time. It was a day of celebration nationwide and it stayed that way in the years that followed.

Amelia was still staring at the newspaper clipping when it came to her: the Hall of Prophecies, the Great War, Harry Potter. It all came together in her head and she remembered the first time she heard of the Hall of Prophecies.

It had been nothing more than a rumour, a fantasy in desperate times amidst the height of war when she felt like she would latch onto anything, even the smallest, most ridiculous rumour if it meant that they could have something to fight for. Rumours of a prophecy which foretold a way to defeat You Know Who. And if it explained how to get rid of him then maybe…

Amelia shuddered. She stopped that train of thought right where it was and called it back to the station. She didn’t know which prophecy had been stolen—no one knew. Yet. She wouldn’t waste her day spinning ridiculous theories in her head.

“That’s the last thing you need, Amelia. It’s not enough you have dozens of people whispering the worst behind your back, now you have to do it to yourself, too,” she whispered. “Enough is enough.”

Madame Bones dipped her long dried quill in some ink and got to work.

-D-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

Ducking behind an open window pane, the large man watched as a gangly youth navigated the
streets of Hogsmeade. The wizard tripped on the uneven cobblestones and landed on hands and knees. As he cursed his misfortune he took out a wand and did away with the rough skin on the heels of his palms and the dirt clinging to his pants.

Mad-Eye Moody grinned. Bingo.

It was a chilly day. Mist hung over the streets of the village, a dewy, white veil that possessed no apparent weight yet dripped heavily off the shoulders of women and weighed down the feet of men. The fog parted and curled around Moody as he limped a path towards the young wizard already on his feet and walking away. One of ex-Auror’s eyes remained fixed on the boy as the other whirled around in its socket and scanned its surroundings, pausing in seemingly random places only to whirl back in place and begin its inspection anew.

As the youth strode over to the door of a pub and greeted a man out front with obvious familiarity, the ex-Auror following him paused. The interaction took him aback for a moment, made him doubt the real identity of the wizard. His instincts told him to turn around and leave this as yet another failed endeavour but his pride wouldn't let him give up just yet.

Not two nights ago, Moody had gone on an expedition and had visited the Dursley home. He’d figured that if anyone knew why or where Harry Potter had escaped to, it would be the family he’d spent living with most of his life. Imagine his shock upon finding out, not three minutes after stepping foot inside the house, just what type of people the Dursleys actually were. They had taken one look at his clothes, his face and the wand poking out of his jacket and had slammed the door on his face, yelling threats out the window and shifting locks in place.

Being the type of man that he was rumoured to be, Moody had been sorely tempted to raise his wand and hex the rotund walrus and his horse-faced wife six ways till Sunday. It had taken every ounce of his self control not to do that and instead he opted for a less scandalous route (though no less horrifying to Petunia Dursley) and on his way down the path he’d shot four discrete spells at the perfectly normal looking house on Privet Drive.

The first to make the plants wilt and die. The second to make the paint on the house chip and blow to dust in the wind. The third to rust the metal and blow out the tires on Mr Dursley's prized automobile, and the fourth was an Attraction Charm for rats, ants and bats which would turn Number 4 Privet Drive into an irresistible stop along the animals’ way.

He had left the house in a decidedly better mood than when he’d arrived.

Moody sped up and followed the wizard into the pub. He scanned the inside and was pleased to note that apart from himself and another man lying face down on a table there were only four more people, including the bartender.

The place was nothing like the Three Broomsticks, Moody reflected as he sank down on a barstool and ordered a Firewhisky. The bar was painted in dark colours—blacks, greys, browns and dark green; it was clearly not designed for the comfort of the Hogwarts students that visited once or twice a year. Frames were mounted on the walls, of newspaper clippings, the few celebrities that had visited the bar in its prime and interesting factoids meant to stop a customer in his path to read the funny anecdote.

The bartender slapped the glass on the chipped counter and left without a word. Moody huffed, drowned the shot, and fished out a sickle from his pocket, placing it on the counter. It was swallowed up by the wood and disappeared.

Behind the bar was a wall of glass decorated with bottles of all liquors and though the image was
murky, Moody distinguished the blonde hair and navy coat of the wizard he was following. The young wizard was seated at a high table with another man. They nursed their beers and talked in low tones as they hunched over the flickering candle in the centre of their table.

Moody flagged the bartender for another Firewhiskey and settled in for the wait.

“Ne’er seen the likes of you round ‘ere before,” grumbled the bartender, one bushy eyebrow raised higher than the other. “You new?”

“Just passing by,” said Moody.

“Through these parts?” The bartender scoffed. “Nothin’ ‘ere to see for miles, don’t know what you’re on about.”

A flash of blonde in the mirror and Moody’s magical eye twisted in its socket to look through his head. The wizard Moody was after had left his seat and was walking to the end of the pub where a swinging door hid the entrance to the bathroom. Moody slipped out a coin and left to chase after the wizard. He pulled his hood down tighter as he passed by the wizard’s companion still seated at the table but never slowed down his gait.

The door didn’t make a sound as Moody shut it behind him. A Detection Spell confirmed the presence of only two people in the bathroom and a second spell ensured they wouldn’t be disturbed.

Dragonhide shoes stuck out from the farthest stall on the right. Moody marched up to the door and kicked it in with a force that contradicted his age. The terrified look on the young wizard's face didn't stop him from taking him by the neck of his coat and dragging him out. Moody lifted him with a grunt and had him pinned up against the bathroom mirror.

“Now listen 'ere, chap. We've got tons to talk about you an' me,” Moody growled. “But first, let me show you what I like to do to lowlife traffickers like you.”

Moody stormed into his home. His talk with the young wizard had taught him nothing new; in fact it had been a complete and utter bust in every sense of the word. That had been Moody’s last lead, he’d have to start over again if he wanted to have any answers for the Romanians when they come by asking for their missing dragon eggs.

To add insult to injury, it had taken him almost twice as long as usual to disarm all the protective charms, wards and hexes surrounding his property. He had had to hastily duck down when he triggered a hex which had been engineered to shoot jets of Bloodroot Potion at the intruder. In ducking to avoid the poisonous brew, he’d fallen into another trap and the ropes that had shot out from the ground had been a hair’s breadth away from wrapping around his neck before he’d pulled out his Auror training and cancelled the spell.

Moody spat out a long and winding string of colourful expletives when his wooden leg got caught on a hole in the floor. He careened on the spot then yanked out his wand and sent a weak Blasting Curse which blew a larger hole in the ground and set his leg free.

“As if I didn't have enough with all the bloody wankers out there trying to do me in, now I have to worry about my own damn house joining the club! Bloody ridiculous,” he muttered.

He threw his coat on a nearby table and settled down on his only armchair, placed at an angle which kept the front door, window, and stairs leading to the second floor within perfect eyesight.
Soon he had a glass in hand of his allotted three fingers of whiskey and was prepared to settle in for a night of drinking and listening to the wireless when a blur of white dropped from the ceiling and landed by his feet. The Patronus swirled into shape and the ex-Auror was left staring into the milky eyes of a phoenix.

“This better be good, Albus,” Moody grumbled.

The Patronus regarded him with unblinking eyes. It tilted its head to the side, parted its beak and spoke.

“Alastor,” it said in Dumbledore’s echoing voice, “I have important news to share with you, so listen well. Rumours of your quest to find Harry have reached undesirable ears. I fear that others now know that he is no longer under our protection and seek to find the boy through you.” Alastor wanted to scoff at the idea of anyone being able to find him, never mind following him that easily, but held his tongue. “I know what you’re likely thinking but we simply cannot risk anyone else finding Harry before he gets to Hogwarts.

“I ask that you stop looking for him. If you haven’t been able to find him until now, then perhaps he is as safe as he could be. It would be a mistake to call attention to his whereabouts were you to locate him. At Hogwarts he will have the best security in the world and as much as you would argue otherwise, that means you, old friend.”

With that said, the snowy white phoenix shook its head from side to side and fluffed its wings to take flight. It imparted one last message before gracefully taking to the air and gliding through the wall.

“Take care, Alastor.”

Moody shook his head at the Hogwarts headmaster. He sometimes could not fathom how the wizard managed to stay in the lead of everything happening in the world when he had his fingers stuck in too many pies to count as it were. He dreaded the day that it would all catch up to him because, in his eyes, it was bound to happen at some point and he was not sure if he wanted to be around to witness repercussions of such enormous proportions.

He was dropping his glass on the coffee table when he glimpsed something out of the corner of his magical eyep—a blur, a shadow or maybe both. As it was, he didn’t let on that he had noticed anything amiss and settled back in his chair with some careful maneuvering.

Moody was focused on one side of the room so he barely caught the purplish hue of the curse which whizzed at him from the other side and hit him close to his heart. He became groggy instantly. His limbs weighed down on him like wet rags, his bones softened to pudding and his eyelids drooped low over his eyes. Not possessing the ability to hold him up any longer, his body gave up on him and crumbled off the armchair straight to the ground.

He landed on his side and was able to make out the worn heels of two black boots step up to his prone form. Coloured dots were taking over his vision but that didn't stop him from noticing the sheet of liquid silver that pooled down at the intruder's feet.

An Invisibility Cloak, Moody berated himself. I should've realized the wards weren’t acting up for a reason.

“That was disappointing, at least for me it was. Was it disappointing for you, too? I was expecting more of a fight coming from you, Mad-Eye. You sure had some neat tricks up your sleeve the last
time we got together like this, but maybe that’s my mind playing tricks on me again. I’m told it can do that to you after a couple of years in lockup.”

Knees bent, arms folded on top of bony legs and face so close it was brushing against his own, Moody could not believe the wizard standing over him.

“You should check security at Azkaban more often,” Barty Crouch Junior mused in dulcet tones, “seems like everyone is getting out these days, wouldn’t you say?”

Moody heard the beginnings of his rusty, cold laugh before the curse overcame him.

“I’ve been thinking about something for a while now,” said Harry, eyes dangerously close to watering as he kept direct contact with his teacher.

“Yes, I’ve been getting that feeling from you lately,” teased Alice, her mouth pulled down in a frown as she squinted her eyes and kept her wand pointed at Harry’s forehead.

“Only lately?”

Alice laughed and her wand slipped down an inch but she righted it before it could cost her too much.

“What was that? Felt like a slip up to me,” said Harry.

“You wish,” Alice retorted, though her strength was slowly abandoning her. Her arm was shaking with the effort it took to stay in the air.

They kept at it for ten minutes further, neither one willing to be the one to give in to the other. It was nearing the thirty-five minute mark when Alice gave a warning call and dropped her arm to her side, her chest heaving. Harry was collapsed on the couch and experiencing similar problems with his breathing.

“That was very good, Harry,” said Alice. “I’ve never had one of my students last so long under a Legilimency attack before.”

“I didn’t think I would last that long,” Harry admitted.

“You only surprised yourself then. I knew you had it in you. I suspect it’s only a matter of time before you’ll be needing a new teacher to keep up with you.” A swell of pride bubbled up in Alice and burst out in a smile. “What is it you’ve been thinking about? You’ve been so focused on keeping those thoughts to yourself that you’ve let other things slip.”

“What? When? Why didn’t you tell me?” Harry demanded.

“It was nothing big, Harry,” Alice assured him, “just some snippets of random scenes and things like that. I think it might have been a dream you had. All I could make out were two people flying on brooms, I think one of them might have been you and the other was a girl with long hair.”

Harry blanched. “And?” he asked.

“And nothing. That was the only thing I could see.” Alice waited a moment before adding, with a poorly concealed smirk on her lips, “Why? Was there something else?”

“No,” Harry answered quickly. He cleared his throat and added, “You’re right, it was just a dream
and that’s it. There wasn’t anything… That’s all it was, I mean I’d never had it before and...it was a surprise, it’s not like I planned for it to happen…”

Alice wisely chose not to say anything to the flurry of words coming out of Harry’s mouth. She averted her eyes to give the boy a moment to compose himself as she went through the task of summoning a set of tea and snacks.

By the time she’d finished pouring both cups Harry had gotten a hold of himself. They drank their tea in silence until both cups were half empty and Alice turned back to their conversation.

“You wanted to share something with me,” she prompted him.

Harry nodded. “Hogwarts starts in a couple of weeks,” he said. “We won’t be able to continue these classes once I’m there.”

A boulder dropped into Alice’s stomach. She had avoided thinking about their fast approaching goodbye to the point that she refused to answer any of her job offers and hardly ever made plans more than two days in advance.

“You’ve been an excellent teacher to me. I don’t think I would’ve come this far if it had been anyone else but you.” Harry paused. “You probably have other things to do, other people to teach, but I’d like you to consider teaching Sirius and Remus Occlumency while I’m at Hogwarts.”

It took a moment for Alice to absorb what Harry had said. In the meantime, Harry kept talking.

“We’d pay you well,” he insisted. “I talked to both of them and they agree that it’s asking a lot of you if you’ve already accepted another job. If you have then we completely understand if you want to say no, but it doesn’t have to be a full time thing either. We could…”

Even though Alice had stopped listening, she let Harry continue with his well rehearsed speech as she puzzled over the situation in her mind. It had gone in the complete opposite direction to what she’d been expecting. She hadn’t counted on this outcome and had no plan in place, nothing.

“I’ll take it,” she said. Her statement had caught Harry in the midst of one of his own, causing his tongue to trip over itself.

“You’re sure?” he asked. “You don’t have to answer right away, we still have some time before classes begin. I wouldn’t want you to feel like...like you’re obligated to say yes.”

“I don’t feel obligated to anything, Harry,” Alice said. “I’m a grown woman, I know what I want and I know a good deal when I see one.”

“But-but there in no deal yet,” sputtered Harry. “How can you be sure this one is better than all the others?”

Alice laughed. “Your godfather is the heir to the Black family fortune and he’s an escaped felon hiding from society which severely limits his options for teachers. Not to mention Remus’ lycanthropy would also narrow your search even more and I believe in that small intersection between the two, I’m the only option you have left. Trust me, Harry, I’ll get a good deal.”

Harry chuckled and matched her smile with his own grin. He liked Alice, she was one of the best teachers he’d ever had and over the summer she’d become a staple in his life in a time when everything else was drastically changing. He hadn’t wanted to part ways with her and had been relieved when Sirius and Remus had taken so readily to his Occlumency suggestion. Though he’d had a plan in place, he hadn’t expected Alice to take to it so readily.
“You’re staying?” He’d meant for it to be a statement of fact but instead it came out more like a hopeful question than anything else.

“I’m staying,” she confirmed.
Chapter 11

Foreign shoulders brushed against his own as a throng of witches and wizards of all ages skipped past him. Harry kept his head low even as a rational part of his being urged him to stop acting so suspicious. He couldn't help it though. Even with the knowledge that the charms on his face were enough to disguise him from even those who had known him for years, a small part of him was unseasonably paranoid.

“All right there, Harry?”

A hand dropped down on his shoulder from behind and subtly guided him to match its owner’s rhythm.

“Yeah,” answered Harry. “I guess I didn't really believe you when you told me how bloody packed it would be.”

“Language,” reminded a third, softer and calmer voice.

“Let the boy be, Remus. He's fourteen years old for Merlin's sake, let him swear a little.” Harry was about to thank his godfather when the man added, “It's the most he'll get away with anyway.”

The two men continued ribbing Harry as they strode down the dirt path towards two seemingly normal looking wooden poles. These stood about ten metres and marked the entrance to the Quidditch World Cup camping ground. Five Aurors stood guard by the entrance, vigilantly observing the oncoming crowd.

As they approached the Aurors, the three wizards felt the hairs on the backs of their necks stand on end and a shiver of warning go down their spines. Remus' hand twitched towards the wand concealed beneath his belt. Sirius tightened his hand on his godson and loosened his stance. Harry likewise felt the change in the air and gripped the end of his shirt to stop the urge to fidget as they waited in line for their turn to pass through security.

“This was a bad idea,” muttered Remus.

“You don't know that yet, Moony. We have to be here not just because this is little Harry's first time watching the big boys play,” —a polyjuiced Sirius ruffled the boy's blonde hair playfully— “but because this is probably the last time in a long while that we'll get to do something like this.”

The vision Harry had came unbidden to the forefront of their minds. The reminder both sobered them up and softened the tension they carried.

The line to the Auror checkpoint moved slowly. The couple in front of them had a child who preened under the Auror’s attention and lengthened the standard proceedings but they too joined the tittering masses on the other side.

“Next!” cried the Auror.

They walked up to him.

“Name, wands and tickets, please.” The man in the burgundy robe looked like the last thing he wanted to be doing on a Saturday evening was babysitting Quidditch fanatics. His voice was dull and unappealing, his tone a monotone that matched his expression.
They gave him the three names they’d decided on before their arrival and handed over the fake wands Remus had procured from a special friend he’d made from his years before teaching at Hogwarts. The wands were manufactured to pass a mediocre inspection and nothing more, they couldn’t be used to make magic and they certainly wouldn’t hold up under more vigorous analysis.

“All seems to be in order. Living sectors A to F can be found to the right, G to L to the left. Stadium is straight ahead, past the merchandise stands. Enjoy the game.” He handed back their wands and waved for them to hurry along, not sparing them a second glance before yelling out, “Next!”

For a strange second as he was walking away from the Auror, Harry didn’t know whether he should be glad or appalled at the ease with which a fugitive and the runaway Boy Who Lived could pass the security of the magical world's most popular and populated events, Harry decided to count his blessings and not tempt the fates for once.

If he thought the entrance to the World Cup was crowded with people, it was nothing compared to what greeted them on the other side.

There were no streets, not any paved ones. It seemed as though the wizarding population had unanimously created their own boundaries and set their own rules here. Tents of all shapes, sizes and colours seemed like they had dropped from the sky itself, leaving no regard for any sense for organization. So many things were happening at once that Harry didn't know where to look to first. It reminded him of his first trip to Diagon Alley, he'd been so overwhelmed by all the new sights—even new smells—at the time that his senses had been working overload to process it all.

Harry’s attention was being pulled from so many different directions that he was left clueless where to start exploring. He was walking past a man selling magical figurines of all the Quidditch players from both teams when he was brought to a standstill as a small, thin body crashed into his legs and fell over backwards on a patch of grass. The house-elf wasted no time in picking herself up and hurriedly curtseyng to Harry.

“Winky apologizes deeply, young sir,” she squeaked. “She did not see you there and it is only her fault she caused young sir to stumble. Bad Winky.” Harry knew from experience where the situation was leading to as the elf dropped down on her knees and braced her hands against the ground, ready to administer her own punishment.

“It's quite all right,” he said, then hastened to add, “I wasn't looking where I was going either so we could say it was both our faults. And no one got hurt so I see no reason for you to change that now.”

Slowly, so as not to startle her, Harry bent down and grabbed her by the shoulders to gently pull her back upright. She blinked up at him with huge eyes and began twisting her legs like she was unsure how they worked now that she was back on her feet. Winky gathered all her courage and locked eyes with Harry.

She retreated back three steps on shaky legs. Her elfin eyes saw past the glamours to Harry’s real features and she had instantly recognized the scar on forehead. Winky had only heard stories about the wizard responsible for saving the world from You Know Who; to actually meet him in person was more than she could have ever hoped to achieve.

Like the wizarding world, the house-elves had also found hope in the baby that had defeated the Dark Lord and years after the fact, as the little boy joined Hogwarts, more stories started circulating the underground of magical England. Whispers of his kindness, his courage and his power had travelled from mouth to mouth and grown to such proportions that they had reached Winky too.

“Ha-Harry Potter sir, it's you,” whispered Winky. “Oh what has Winky done! She nearly caused Mr
Potter to get injured! Winky is truly a terrible, terrible house-elf.” She began to cry in earnest. Her cries were so loud that they started drawing attention from passers-by. Harry exchanged quick looks of panic with Sirius and Remus and received two separate looks which conveyed the same message: Stop her. They couldn’t call attention to themselves.

As Harry bent down on his knees to comfort Winky, Remus discreetly took out his wand and cast a Silencing Charm on the four of them while Sirius performed a Notice-Me-Not Charm which took care of the wandering eyes.

“Winky—that’s your name, right? Winky.” The elf worked in a weak nod in between sobs. “Winky, listen to me very carefully. I need you to calm down, all right? Nobody knows I’m here and if you keep crying, they’ll start to really notice and they’ll find out about me, so you need to stop.”

Winky succeeded in reducing her cried to sniffles and then to jumpy hiccups. She took out a handkerchief from a pocket to blow her nose and produced a sound of unsettling similarity to a foghorn. Her ears flopped against her head as she did so, idly reminding Harry of a golden retriever.

“Better?” he asked. It was the wrong thing to say as her eyes filled with tears again.

“H-Harry Potter is too kind to Winky. The stories about him are all true.”

Harry forced a laugh and said, “I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

Winky smiled. “Winky has kept Harry Potter from his duties for far too long and she must be getting back to serving her master.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Winky.”

The house-elf had turned to leave but whirled around on a sudden thought and announced, “Winky will keep Harry Potter’s secret, she swears it” then hurried off to be swallowed in by the crowd.

Remus and Sirius took down their respective spells and continued their stroll of the grounds as if nothing had been amiss. Harry was inspecting a pair of magical binoculars that boasted all sorts of interesting functions when he saw Remus sidle up to him.

“Are you sure that was wise, Harry?” he asked. “With a house-elf you can never be sure about anything you tell them unless they belong to you. Otherwise their allegiance lies with their master only, she'd have no choice but to obey his command if he asked her about this.”

“I know that, Remus, but short of obliterating her there wasn’t much more we could do. Besides, you saw how she reacted to seeing me,” Harry added reluctantly. “She won't say anything unless they ask her point blank if she saw me tonight. And what are the chances of that happening?”

“With you concerned? I'm afraid to find out,” Sirius retorted.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Let’s keep moving.”

They were first to arrive at the Top Box. Both Harry and Remus had been hesitant in purchasing such high-level seats when they were trying their best to keep a low profile but they had been swiftly overrun by Sirius.

The privacy gave them time to search through the Top Box without any interruptions. They fanned out across the small room and ran their wands over the walls, seats, tables and windows, leaving nothing uncovered as they muttered spells and incantations under their breaths.
Satisfied that nothing was amiss, they plopped down in their seats just in time to hear an adolescent voice droll up to them from the stairs.

“I just don't understand why the Minister would not give you the entire box, father,” whined Draco Malfoy. “Salazar only knows the sort of people we’ll be stuck with for the entire game.”

Harry closed his eyes. Behind the veil of darkness, he marveled for a moment at the universe’s sick sense of humour which would have him locked in a small room with Draco Malfoy for the duration of what promised to be one of the best Quidditch matches of the decade.

“You know I cannot control the Minister’s actions, Draco. How he deems fit to distribute the tickets, as misguided as it may be, is none of my concern and it should be none of yours either. You are a Malfoy, these ordinary,” he laced that word with disdain, “people are of no matter to us.” Malfoy Senior pushed the door open with his staff, his wife following behind him with their son entering last. “Do you understand, son?”

“Yes, father.”

Sirius tensed ever so slightly as the Malfoys entered the room. They found their seats quickly and ignored the other three people already seated in the box.

Shortly after the entrance of the Malfoys the Top Box started filling up with more people. Tall, dark haired men marched in in arrow formation with a single man dressed in heavy, rich robes ensconced between them. They had barely finished occupying the middle row of seats when Minister Fudge and Ludovic Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, casually walked in while in the middle of a conversation.

Harry, Remus and Sirius tried not to be too obvious as they observed Mr Bagman walk up to the viewing balcony and walk along it to the far corner where a small podium had been set up in the open air. He spent a moment taking in the Quidditch stadium before he brought his wand to his throat and cast the Sonorus Charm.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Boomed Ludo Bagman. “The Quidditch match will be starting shortly. Please, find your respective seats and prepare to bear witness to one of THE BEST MATCHES IN QUIDDITCH HISTORY!”

Harry was unsure whether Mr Bagman knew that there was absolutely no need to yell, or if he took some enjoyment out of leaving thousands of people deaf. As the man went on to list the sponsors of the game and regale everyone with an abridged version of the origins of Quidditch, Harry heard the stomping feet of new arrivals approaching the box.

“Blimey, dad! This is bloody amazing!”

“Ron! Would you please watch your language?”

“I barely said anything, Hermione. Who am I offending with saying ‘bloody’ anyway? It's just a word.”

“It’s a crass word used indiscriminately by boorish people.”

“What did you just call me?”

Undoubtedly anticipating the fight that was about to unravel, Mr Weasley was quick to intervene.

“All right kids, remember which seats you’re in and hurry to sit down. The game will start at any
moment now.”

Even though he had known about the Weasleys' plans to attend the Quidditch World Cup, Harry had thought that he would be safe from interaction with them when Sirius had chosen to buy the expensive seats. He'd figured there was no way the Weasleys would spend so much money on them.

As the family came through the door, Harry made a careful inventory of who was present. He immediately recognized the twins wearing ridiculous hats and sporting mischievous grins on their faces as they whispered behind Percy's back. Mr Weasley was accompanied by his two eldest sons, Charlie and Bill. Ron was staying close to Hermione and although she had clearly done her deal of growing during the summer, he towered over her and had to scrunch his shoulders and droop his head to make eye contact.

His gaze shifted from Hermione to the only other girl in the group walking up behind the twins. Ginny had done her hair in a long braid which ran the length of her back and stopped just shy of her bum. She was dressed aggressively in green and had even painted stripes on the apples of her cheeks. If it weren't for the top hat with a dancing leprechaun on the front, he would say she looked like a forest nymph out exploring the human world.

Harry's mouth went dry. He was forced to look away as the Weasleys took their seats in front of him and readied themselves to watch the game.

Drums beat in the distance and music blared in the stadium, almost rocking them in their seats with its intensity.

The game had officially started.

"Viktor Krum has caught the snitch! Ireland wins!"

Cheers erupted throughout the entire stadium. Caught up in the moment as they were, even Harry, Sirius and Remus let loose for a moment and jumped up to cheer with the rest of the fans. They hugged each other joyously, high on the team’s win and even received a few back slaps from the twins who were so out of their minds with glee that they didn’t notice they were interacting with strangers.

Harry had no problem admitting that it was one of the best games of Quidditch he had ever seen. It was so full of action, speed and competition that it really put into perspective the matches they had at Hogwarts. Comparing the two was like putting an iguana next to a dragon. The two animals were so completely different that they didn't even belong in the same world.

He'd taken care to keep an eye on his friends every so often during the game and was happy to note that they were enjoying themselves as well. He was embarrassed to admit that he may have spent a few seconds too many staring at Ginny’s profile as she watched the Chasers throw the Quaffle around but there was not much he could do about it as it appeared to be entirely out of his control.

The crowd carried them along as they exited the stadium and headed towards the tents. Earlier in the week Sirius has reluctantly rummaged through the forgotten rooms in his house and had come down baring a magical tent the proportions of which only a Pureblood family would own. Together, they had done their best to rid it of any unsavoury pieces of furniture and décor and had left only the essentials.

For safety reasons they had dismantled any previous charms, hexes, spells and wards that had been
placed on the tent and had armed it with a combination of their own. Harry was sure the enchantments they'd used were not as effective as something a Curse Breaker like Bill could've come up with but was rather pleased to find out that on top of being an excellent Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus was also very gifted in Charms.

The flap to the tent shoved aside, Harry invited the other two to go in ahead of him as an excuse to keep a lookout on the Weasley family. With their flaming orange red hair and large numbers they were rather easy to spot. They were talking excitedly to each other about the match and continued to discuss the highs and lows of the game as they entered their burgundy coloured abode five tents down Harry’s own.

Relieved that he could get to them quickly if something happened—his past experiences having proved to always expect the worst out of any given situation—Harry retired to his own tent. He gazed around the interior with the same amount of silent wonder he had the first time round. Upon entering the tent one was met with a small entryway with a coat closet to the right and an umbrella stand to the left. A sheer curtain and two small steps separated this from the large living room. The kitchen was further down the way and comprised of a table which could seat five people comfortably, though there was also a separate dining room that could dine many more. A study, small library, play room with a bar and a bathroom completed the first floor.

Harry didn’t have the energy to think about the second floor. It was safe to say that the Blacks had no qualms spending money and making sure everyone else knew it. Or rub it in your face, as Harry liked to think of it.

“Just how rich was your family, Sirius? We could fit in ten Quidditch teams in here and still have room to spare.”

“Don’t joke about it, pup.” Sirius shouted from the kitchen, his voice getting louder the closer Harry walked. “This is only the half of it, and barely even that if I'm being honest with you. My family had more money than they knew what to do with and the worst part is that after living your entire life surrounded by,” he made a wild gesture with his hands, “this, it’s hard to get used to anything else. That's the way it was for me, at least I can admit it now, I was pretty spoilt as a child.”

Remus howled out a laugh as he strode in the room.

“You were nothing short of a nightmare our first few weeks at Hogwarts,” he said. “He’d charm the robes off every professor and then turn around and whine about the food being too salty or the bed sheets being the wrong kind of fabric or the bathroom! No one hated sharing a shower more than your godfather, Harry.”

Harry grinned as the two older men continued to poke fun at each other and regale Harry with stories of their school days as the infamous Marauders, and even some tales after Lily and James had become a couple.

As the clock struck midnight they all parted ways and went to get ready for the night. It had been decided before coming to the game that they would be taking turns sleeping. The first shift would be taken by Remus and he was to stay awake until three in the morning when Harry would take his place only to then wake up Sirius and go back to sleep himself three hours later.

Slipping in between the covers, Harry dropped his glasses on the bedside table and kept his wand under his pillow, one hand grasping it tightly. He was more tired than he thought and was pulled into sleep before he knew it.
His alarm blared out ten minutes before three in the morning. Being the light sleeper that he was, he immediately woke up and jumped to his feet. Harry gave a violent shiver as the cold of the night settled into his bones and quickly put on his glasses and laced boots to his feet. Jacket in hand, he shuffled down the stairs to the ground floor and stepped out into the night air.

He'd barely taken a step out of the tent before Remus removed his Disillusionment Charm and stepped up to the young wizard.

“All’s been generally quiet through the night except for the odd drunk or two.” Hours of keeping silent had left Remus' voice scratchy from disuse. “There’s really not much to do but you have to keep an eye out all the same.”

“OK, don't worry. You go to bed and I'll wake up Sirius later.”

They hugged sleepily, Remus dangerously close to falling asleep on Harry’s shoulder as the man’s head dropped from exhaustion and his weight settled uncomfortably in Harry’s arms. Harry shook him awake and watched him disappear up the stairs one heavy step at a time.

Disillusioning himself with a wave of his wand, Harry settled down on the ground in front of the flap to the tent and kept his eyes peeled for anything and everything. He waited in that same position for an hour before something far off into the distance caught his attention. On his feet, he shifted to the side and strained his eyes to see past the lines of tents to the soft orange glow getting brighter and bigger.

He didn't raise the alarm yet, he didn’t know what he was waiting for, but he knew that he'd know it when it happened. There was an electricity in the air, a current that swept through him and gave him gooseflesh. His breathing was loud in his ears, he was half convinced it was a beacon calling to whatever danger was about to approach.

Come on. What is it? What’s the matter?

A jolt zapped through him and turned him to the right. Wand held straight in front of him and stance ready for a fight, he watched as a half a dozen hooded figures with white masks apparated in on the grounds. They converged for a moment or two, then went for the closest tents and, without any provocation or warning, began lighting them on fire.

Harry's wand was already touching the bracelet on his wrist to activate those worn by Sirius and Remus—just in case, they'd said—when more cracks of apparition rang in the distance. He watched with mounting worry as another set of masked wizards apparated close to the Weasleys’ tent and felt no small amount of guilty relief as they bypassed it completely to wreak havoc elsewhere.

His bracelet warmed up against his skin, a sign Remus and Sirius had gotten his warning.

Three tents down, a small group of the masked figures had broken off to head into one of the tents and came out balancing something above their heads. They used their wands to levitate the thing higher in the air and when Harry caught sight of the terrified faces of the family they were playing with, he knew he couldn’t wait for Remus and Sirius to arrive.

The screams of the family and the loud explosions as the fires spread beyond the tents had started alerting people that there was something amiss. Women, men and children were rushing out still wearing their nightclothes and were forced to duck, run and sometimes duel for their safety as the masked wizards evolved to violence and began attacking wildly.

Harry skirted along the edges of the pandemonium, keeping his Disillusionment Charm intact as he
rushed to the family’s aid. Their attackers had lost interest in listening to their screams as they tossed them through the air and had lowered the crying mother to the ground. Two of the wizards circled the woman while the third kept her husband and child hovering above her head.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!”

The spells caught the two men in the back and had them crumbling to the ground. Husband and child were dropped aside as the third wizard reacted to his partners’ defeat and braced himself for an attack.

Harry knew that the Disillusionment Charm only worked if the subject was standing still and he had already lost the element of surprise. There was only one thing he could do.

Harry charged the man.

“Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Impedimenta!”

Ready for an assault, the masked wizard put up a shield in time to deflect Harry’s first two spells but as the magic weakened his defences and the attacks kept coming, the shield flickered and failed. The Impediment Jinx smacked him in the face and gave Harry the time to stun him.

Harry turned to the family next and noticed that though they had pushed their child behind their back and faced Harry head on, neither mother nor father had pulled out their wands. They were Muggles.

“Run,” Harry told them. “Run as fast as you can and don’t stop until you’ve reached the woods. You can’t protect yourselves here, but you’ll be safe as long as they can’t find you.” The family stood frozen in shock. “GO!”

Harry stayed put long enough to see the family safely out of his sight. Evidence of fighting all across the camping ground had gotten louder since last Harry had checked. He ran back the way he had come.

He knew he had been extremely lucky to have caught those three wizards by surprise when he came upon Remus and Sirius outnumbered and duelling against four masked wizards. His godfather was bleeding from a gash on his forehead and Remus was favouring his right side slightly more than the left.

Harry thought quickly and aimed a minor explosion at the feet of one of the men duelling Remus. The curse didn’t do any damage to the wizard but it caught his attention and he changed tactics to attack Harry instead. Harry traded spells with his opponent and was just about to turn the ground under his opponent's feet into quicksand when a Cutting Curse from behind surprised him and sliced his shoulder.

Harry ducked as the next round of curses—this time from two different sides—were hurled at him and performed a quick tuck and roll to get into a better position. Soon, he was trading off spells against two adversaries instead of one.

As one of his attackers fell to a stunner, Harry heard several distinctive cracks amidst the screaming. Aurors had started apparating into the area and were seen running around putting out fires, tending to the wounded and battling the masked wizards.

The wizard that Harry was fighting realized they were becoming severely outnumbered. He dodged Harry’s next spell and yelled, “Fall back! It’s time! Let’s go!”.

Following the man’s advice, the masked attackers started disapparating. The ones left standing rushed
to the fallen ones and held onto them as they transported them out of the scene.

In the distance, the sounds of fighting continued—not everyone had gotten the message to retreat.

“We have to get out of here!” shouted Sirius.

“What? No! There are still some of them left and the muggles can’t fight—”

“The Aurors will take care of them, Harry,” Remus interrupted him. “You can’t save everyone and we have to leave before the situation calms down and they put up Anti-Apparition wards.”

As though heeding to Remus’ warning, a wave of magic rushed over their heads and settled a bubble textured dome across the sky.

“I think it's already too late.”

Remus’ eyes widened in alarm. He twisted his feet to try to apparate and failed.

“Come on! We have to get out of here. The ward can’t extend everywhere, I say we head for the woods.” Sirius led the way as they ran to the forest.

Soon they were bursting into the trees, coming to a stop when the lights from the spells and fires were out of sight.

“Do you think we've run far enough?” Remus panted.

“No, I can still feel it,” said Harry.

“Feel what?”

“I think it's the wards. The magic from the wards, I can feel it and I felt it when someone performed the spell before.” Despite the situation they found themselves in, Harry felt uncomfortable admitting something he'd kept to himself for so long.

“You can feel magic?” asked Sirius. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, I couldn’t do it before and I think I can see the magic in the wards sometimes too,” he added as he remembered their visit to the Ministry of Magic and the patchwork of strands on the ceiling. “I take it it's not something everyone can do and that I’m just late on the uptake?”

“You could say that, yeah,” snapped Sirius, then shook his head forcefully. “Now is not the time.”

They trudged further into the forest. They hadn’t been walking for long when the forest was bathed in green and a light emerged between some trees and shot for the sky.

They looked up.

“Oh God.”

There was a skull etched into the sky. Its edges were joined together with streams of emerald smoke. The skull moved, opened its mouth and a snake slithered out, twisting under the skull’s still image. The woods all around them broke out in screams.

Harry didn’t know it yet—he had no reason to—but that day was the first time since his parents’ deaths that the Dark Mark was to be found tainting the sky.
Chapter 12

It was decided almost the minute that he crossed the barrier between platforms 9 and 10 that an empty platform 9 ¾ was nothing short of unsettling.

Having departed from Grimmauld Place an hour earlier than Harry was used to, they'd been successful in avoiding early morning traffic into central city London. Be it via the Floo network, by car, taxi, bus or Portkey, any and all means of transport were an absolute nightmare on the 1st September.

The Muggles thought nothing of it as it also coincided with the back to school drama on their side of the world. The more eccentric and stuck in the times wizards and witches who decidedly stood out from the general crowd were quickly forgotten as the day-to-day working man and woman had more pressing things to worry about than the man wearing floor length robes or the child carrying an owl in a cage and heaving a trunk twice their size.

It was a new experience for Harry to arrive at the magical platform without the theatrics that normally accompanied his life. He remembered that his first year hadn't been all too bad as the Weasleys had eventually helped him find his way but he chalked it up to the newness of the whole situation—his first introduction to the magical world, maybe also beginner's luck—that it fell into the 'out of the ordinary' category. Dobby had pretty much ruined his second year by closing the barrier on them and his third year he'd had to be escorted by Aurors and driven in a special car for fear that his godfather might murder him on his way to Hogwarts.

Harry stopped himself just shy of snorting out loud.

Strolling up and down the platform with only a black, scraggly dog for company and the occasional sighs, whines and croaks emitted by the waiting train was oddly peaceful. It was a grey and cloudy day in Britain—not much out of the ordinary at all. His trunk had been shrunken down to the size of a pencil sharpener to fit in his pocket and Hedwig had been ecstatic to make the journey to Hogwarts riding the air currents. She hated that wretched cage so much that Harry couldn't force himself to lock her in there hours on end when he now had the chance to set her free. He'd received countless grateful offers of dead mice and frogs from his little friend after he'd told her the news.

As he rocked back and forth on the soles of his feet (half an hour to go before people started arriving) his mind flashed back to the events during and after the Quidditch World Cup.

The crisis with the Death Eaters had ended up being resolved by the Aurors, though a large part of their success was thanks to a few people like Sirius, Remus and Harry who bravely fought the Death Eaters and won enough time for the authorities to arrive. The Daily Prophet had informed them the next day that none of the men hiding behind their masks had been captured. The had all fled the second the Dark Mark hit the sky. Luckily for the Ministry of Magic, the injuries suffered hadn’t been severe, not a single person had spent more than three days recuperating at St Mungo’s but no amount of potions or healing spells could cure the grief and fear brought about by the reappearance of the Dark Mark.

The incident was officially ruled as nothing more than assault and vandalism by a group of what the Ministry speculated were rowdy teenagers, too drunk, stupid or uncaring to realize the implications of their actions. As for the Dark Mark, that went unexplained. The most preferred theory was that it hadn't been the Dark Mark at all, merely a forgery of the original one meant to scare the Aurors long enough to allow the criminals their chance to escape. There was no one willing to so much as consider the implications of it being the real Dark Mark and the Ministry felt safe in their knowledge
that no one outside the inner circle of Voldemort's own Death Eaters had known the incantation.

The message had been spread: ‘World Cup interrupted by fake Dark Mark. Citizens have no reason to worry.’ Within a week nearly everyone had gotten over the attack and immersed themselves in the preparations to head back to school.

Harry watched the minute hand on the platform clock strike ten fifteen on the dot and could only marvel at the unrelentless human capacity for self-assurance. He struggled between feeling frustrated that the Ministry would continue to spout comforting lies to the people and relief that the attack hadn’t been too bad and the magical world was fast recovering. It would just make the inevitable return of the Dark Lord all the more devastating for sure, but he knew they weren’t ready to accept the truth—not yet.

The scratching sound of wheels on pavement reached his ears as the first handful of students to arrive crossed the barrier and hurried to load their belongings onto the train. In a matter of heartbeats, the train station was teeming with children of all ages running around greeting old friends and trying to escape their parents' embarrassingly tight clutches.

The clock struck quarter to eleven.

A little boy—possibly six or seven years old—stood watching a few feet away as his mother and father bid farewell to their eldest daughter. The girl had one foot on the train steps but twirled around at the last second and picked up her little brother in her arms. She placed a big, sloppy kiss on his cheek and laughed with her parents as he furiously tried to wipe it off and shove her away from him in the same breath. Placing one last smooch on his head, she set him on the ground, said a last few words to her parents, and boarded the train.

As the now family of three turned to leave the station, Harry remained transfixed on the little boy. He stared as they reached the barrier and caught him glancing one last time at the large, red train. His hand had drifted to the cheek where his sister had placed her kisses, his bottom lip wobbling tellingly.

Harry had to look away as the little boy's father picked him up and placed his head on his shoulder, speaking muted words of comfort that were swallowed whole when they crossed the barrier back into King’s Cross. An age-old pain had erupted in Harry's chest—one that he hadn't felt since moving to Grimmauld Place with his godfather and Remus.

Something warm and wet touched his hand and he glanced down to be met with a pair of round, dark brown eyes looking up at him worriedly. Harry shook his head and pushed his melancholic thoughts to the side. He crouched down on the balls of his feet and let Padfoot rest his front paws on Harry’s knees, bringing them at eye level to each other.

“You worry too much, Padfoot. It just hits you sometimes, you know?” Harry knew without a doubt that his godfather knew exactly what he was talking about and after another lick (this time to his cheek) no more was said on the subject.

The clock struck ten to eleven.

A family of redheads and their brown haired friend stormed onto the platform. Herding the six Hogwarts students like dogs did to their sheep, Molly Weasley held her arms spread wide and her eyes peeled for any obstacles in her way. She was urging them onto the train with the practice and ease of a commander ordering his soldiers to war. Nothing stood in that woman's way as she tried to get her family safely on board and shipped off to school for the year.
The Weasleys reached the edge of the platform and converged in a group. Despite the late hour, they made no move to get on the train and it took Harry a long time to realize the reason for it, by which time the lump in his throat that he’d bravely fought down had returned.

“Looks like it’s time for me to go,” Harry murmured. “Take care of yourself and listen to Moony, and take care of him, too. This month was a tough one, I don’t think he’s used to having people around when he turns anymore. It was rough.” Sirius whined and bobbed his head. It had been because of the werewolf transformation four days prior that Remus hadn’t been able to come say goodbye to Harry.

“See you around, Snuffles.”

Sirius barked once, wagged his tail, and trotted away. Harry stood where he was for a moment, then took a deep breath and approached the Weasleys.

“Mrs Weasley,” he said, tapping her on the shoulder. In an instant she had whirled around and had her arms wrapped around him.

“Harry, dear!” she exclaimed. “It is so good to see you. We’ve hardly had a word from you in the last few months, you had us all worried sick. I’ve had to wrestle the car keys from Ron more than once in the past month and let me tell you, in the last weeks it was him who had to keep them away from me. You should have sent word.”

Properly ashamed in himself in the face of Mrs Weasley’s genuine concern, Harry bowed his shoulders and dropped his head between them as she continued talking at him and patting him down in a motherly fashion, muttering about his aunt and uncle having finally learned to feed him right. He blushed furiously at the comments yet Mrs Weasley would not be dissuaded and continued her tangent.

She grabbed him up in another hug and this time Harry spotted Ron and Hermione over her shoulder, waiting for their turn at him.

“I’m sorry to have worried you all,” he spoke to all of them, “but I promise I’m better than I’ve ever been before. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, we can tell, you look like you’ve finally put on some muscles, mate. If I squint my eyes, I think you might come up to chin now,” said Ron, pushing past his mother to get to his friend.

Harry laughed and uncharacteristically pulled him into a hug. Though he was caught off guard by such a show of affection from his usually reserved friend, Ron returned the embrace enthusiastically.

“Harry, I can’t believe you didn’t tell us how you were doing. We didn't even get your reply about the World Cup until the day after,” Hermione scolded him once Ron let go of him and threw herself at him, trapping him in her hug.

“I missed you too, Hermione,” he said.

“Did you really? You look like you’ve done pretty well on your own,” she teased him.

“Not completely on my own, I’ve had some help.” At her inquiring look, he shook his head to let her know they’d talk about it later. She levelled him with another look which told him, ‘We’d better, or there will be Hell to pay’.

Next were Fred and George Weasley. The two jokers of the family were not to be outdone by the rest, they each hugged Harry from opposite sides and tried to lift him up in the air. They groaned
dramatically, bemoaning their weak arms and making a big show of lining their arms next to his own to compare.

“Yup, just as we thought, brother mine,” said George gravely.

“We'll have to keep an eye on this one before the ladies grab a hold of him,” Fred grinned.

Harry rolled his eyes at Fred and George’s antics and waved them off. He knew he had changed a bit during the summer, he’d grown a head taller and yes, Sirius’ training had also gained him some definition but it was nowhere as extreme as the twins were making it out to be.

They joked around a little more, exchanging small talk amongst themselves in between loaded looks that hinted at a real talk approaching later on the train. But no amount of idle conversation could make Harry forget that he still had one last Weasley to greet. As though his thoughts had called her to appear, Ginny pushed her brothers out of the way and propped herself in front of Harry. Locking her gaze with those powerful green eyes, she felt herself regress for a second slightly to the blushing and clumsy ten year old that stuck her elbow in the butter dish but another look at the smile on his face—the one she’d like to think was just for her—had her pulling herself back together.

Harry, for his part, felt as though those two months spent exchanging letters and stealing away moments with their mirrors did not do enough to prepare him for finally facing her in person.

“Hey Gin.”

“Hi Harry.”

Eyes locked tight on each other, they didn't notice the curious eyes of two witches studying their every move.

Harry didn’t know what to say. They’d had countless interactions face to face through a magical mirror and by putting pen to paper but now that he had her right in front of him, where he’s secretly wanted to have her the whole time, he couldn’t come up with enough words to string a sentence together. Harry thought he finally knew what the troll had felt like when he’d been hit on the head with his own club. He lowered his eyes from hers.

“We, uh, should probably get on the train now before it leaves.”

Ginny blinked and Harry wished for Voldemort to show up and do away with him right there and then.

Lucky for him, the train whistle rang out before he could make more of a fool of himself. Mrs Weasley wasted no time in pushing them towards the doors, he thought she might just carry their luggage inside and find them seats too if she could.

The doors slid shut with a hiss. Mrs Weasley tried to yell out a few last minute goodbyes but was thwarted by the last warning bell. The wheels worked fast in picking up speed and soon they were travelling through the countryside of England heading for Scotland.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

It took them a while to find an empty compartment that suited their tastes but they ended up settling near the front of the train. They settled down in their seats and Harry did not have to wait long for the inquisition to begin.

Hermione, being Hermione, was the first to speak up.
“Just where have you been, Harry? We’ve sent you countless letters but they’d only ever reach you if we used Hedwig, otherwise they’d return with the owl or just never leave! We spent all summer wondering what could’ve possibly happened to you and now you show up like nothing happened, like you didn’t disappear on us, looking...well,”—she made a helpless gesture with her hands before waving one to encompass his entire form—“good.”

“If you’re this surprised to see me looking a bit better, I don’t want you to tell how I must have looked like before,” said Harry wryly. “The reason no other owl except Hedwig could find me is because I haven’t been at the Dursleys’—”

“Ah-ha! I knew it!” crowed Hermione. “I knew something fishy was going on, didn’t I tell you, Ron? I said something didn’t seem right to me and I was right.”

Ron looked at her strangely and said, “Yeah and I agreed with you, Hermione. It’s half of what we’ve been talking about since you came to the Burrow.”

“If you haven’t been at the Dursleys’, then where were you?” demanded Hermione.

“I was as safe as I could be, I promise, I just couldn’t tell you where that was at the time and frankly, I shouldn’t tell you now either,” Hermione was about to make her displeasure known but he silenced her with a look and continued, “but you’ve been my best friends for years now and I don’t want to start keeping secrets. You can’t tell anyone else though, not even your parents, not yet. This has to remain between us.”

“You can trust us,” said Ron, then he turned to his sister. “Ginny, go find your friends, Harry needs to talk to us alone.”

The youngest Weasley flushed an angry red from head to toe and hissed, “What makes you think Harry doesn’t want to talk to me too, Ron?”

“Harry wants to tell his friends something important so just run along with your little friends and we’ll see each other at dinner, OK?”

Ginny’s face heated up as her lips turned white from fury. She made a move to reach into her jeans for her wand but a warm hand enveloped her own before she could grab it. The sparks that tingled up her arm from that one touch made it clear to her who it was that was trying to restrain her from granting her brother a one way trip to the infirmary.

“Ron,” began Harry, “I want Ginny to be here to hear this. She’s my friend too and she deserves to know what’s been going on.”

Both Harry and Ginny opted to ignore the fact that she already knew way more than either of his best friends; they didn’t think that would help smooth matters along.

“You don’t have to be nice to her about it just because she’s my little sister,” explained Ron, “we can —”

“She’s also my friend,” stated Harry, “Drop it, mate, she’s staying.”

Ron had only heard Harry use what he liked to call his ‘mission voice’ during the times when the trio had sneaked off on dangerous adventures together. In the current setting, it was disconcerting to hear it make an appearance and even more so that the reason it had was his sister. Ron turned to Hermione but she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

Harry pulled Ginny to sit back down next to him and ignored the warmth travelling up his arm from
their sides brushing against each other. He didn’t realize that he still had a hand covering her own (Ginny certainly took notice) as he began the abridged tale of what had happened to him during the summer. It was as he was nearing the point when the three of them had broken into the Department of Mysteries that Harry stumbled over his words, thought quickly, and recovered.

He didn’t mention the prophecy.

Hermione sponged up every last detail of Harry’s tale and had already formulated a question for each and every concern or doubt that she had found. She was so caught up in her own thoughts that she failed to notice Ginny’s reaction to what Harry was saying: mainly her subdued demeanour—she did not look as surprised at the turn of events as Ron and Hermione did.

“Now you see why I could barely write to either of you. And even when I could, I couldn't put much in there for fear that it might somehow get lost or intercepted along the way,” finished Harry.

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, “but what I still don't understand is why you couldn't have saved us all that worrying by having Professor Dumbledore at least tell us that you were somewhere safe with Sir-Snuffles.”

“He couldn't have told you anything about me because he has no idea where I’ve been spending my summer,” Harry answered, tone flat at the mention of the Headmaster.

“How could you not tell Dumbledore? He's the greatest wizard of the age, he's—”

“—supposed to know about these things, Harry,” Hermione interrupted Ron. “Especially since you've been living with a,” she lowered her voice and cast her eyes around, “convicted murderer that has spent the last twelve years in Azkaban and his werewolf best friend.”

Harry knew that Hermione meant well, even if her choice of words sometimes left a lot of things to be desired. He could see the way she was viewing this, he knew how she tended to favour logic over emotion but he needed her to understand that in this case, emotion and logic came hand in hand.

“That convicted murderer is my godfather, Hermione, and he was my dad’s best friend along with the werewolf Dumbledore hired as our professor last year,” Harry pointed out none too gently and was mollified when Hermione lowered her gaze. “They didn’t come into my bedroom in the middle of the night to kidnap me—I wanted to leave.”

“We understand, Harry,” said Hermione. “We know you’ve never liked living with the Dursleys…”

But you don’t know, thought Harry. You don’t know what it was like and I’ll make sure you never do.

“...but is that reason enough to go behind Dumbledore’s back?”

“I don’t trust Dumbledore. That’s why I kept this from him and why I’m not keeping it from you. I trust you, I don’t trust him.”

On that last sombre note, the train compartment fell silent. For the remainder of the trip, they kept up light conversation marked by typical Weasley family anecdotes and Hermione’s vacation abroad and although no one mentioned Dumbledore again, Harry was certain that it was just be a matter of time before they were discussing it again. Only this time, his best friends wouldn’t be giving up so easily.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

A tingle shot down his spine, his toes curled toward the soles of his shoes and the hairs on his arm
stood on end. Taking a deep breath, Harry would swear he could feel magic trembling in the air. It’s source? Hogwarts.

Since the phenomenon of seeing magical energy in their air had begun (he had thought back and realized that he’d always been able to feel the magic, it had just taken being able to see it with his own eyes to realize that the two sensations belonged together) Harry had never encountered magic as strong as the one encasing Hogwarts.

With this new awareness in place, it seemed as though the old magic of the castle was greeting him properly for the very first time. It gripped him in its embrace, swaddled him tight in sheets of rumbling and tingling magic, then dipped him down into a river and allowed the currents to take him away.

He made a valiant effort to ignore all the stares and whispers that followed him around as they stepped through the main doors and walked towards some empty seats on the Gryffindor table. He thought he'd known what it felt like to be gawked and pointed at like an animal at the zoo but clearly the combination of his growth spurt coupled with the new meat on his bones had thrown the entire school in a tailspin that they didn’t seem keen to recover from quite so soon.

“You think they'd at least pretend to be looking at something else instead of outright staring at you like you're a piece of meat on the market,” said Ginny. “I don’t think it was this bad when they thought you were the heir of Slytherin.”

“They’re teenager and they’re girls, dangle a boy who is good looking and famous at the same time and they fall over themselves just to get his attention,” Hermione sniffed distastefully.

“You’re a girl, too,” said Ron, “and you’re the same age they are.”

“It’s different,” Hermione insisted. “Harry’s our friend, not some piece of eye candy. No offence, Harry.”

“I don’t even know if I should be offended or not. It’s just a bit uncomfortable, to have them all staring like that—at me,” muttered Harry.

“You’re not the only one who’s caught their attention, you know,” said Ginny, elbowing Harry and tilting her head in her brother’s direction.

Ron’s head swivelled around like an owl’s and sure enough, he spotted a group of third year girls from Ravenclaw staring at him with clear interest. He started walking with a new spring in his step and didn’t notice the subdued frown painted on Hermione’s lips.

Harry watched with decreasing levels of interest as the first years were sorted into their houses and cheered with his housemates as the newcomers joined the Gryffindor folds. He studied the young children carefully, trying to discern if there were any glaring differences between them that would deem them fitting for one house or the other. But he was no Sorting Hat, he wasn't given the advantage of full disclosure into their innocent minds so he couldn’t say just what it was about each individual that made them fit into Hufflepuff instead of Slytherin.

The last student having finally been sorted, Dumbledore stepped up to the dais and raised his palms to encourage silence among the student body. Shushing each other repeatedly, the Hall finally fell into silence and let the Headmaster say his piece.

“Good evening students of Hogwarts! I bid a warm welcome back to those returning for another year and formally declare my excitement at welcoming so many new faces to our community.” He smiled
at the first years then waited for their excited jitters to subside. “I will do us all a favour and keep this
announcement short as I am sure you are all eager to get to the feast. Firstly, a reminder to all that
under no circumstances are students allowed to enter the Forbidden Forest unattended...”

Harry’s thoughts drifted when the Headmaster went into some variation of the same speech he’d
heard twice before but his ears perked to attention when he mentioned something entirely
unexpected.

“Unfortunately, I am forced to announce that this year there will be no Quidditch tournament and all
practices and tryouts will hereby be cancelled until next year.”

Chaos erupted in the Great Hall as everyone with a voice made their opinion known by shouting it
over each other and shaking their fists at the professors.

The Headmaster calmly dug out his wand from his colourful robes and shot purple sparks into the
air. The tempers that had begun to swing out of control started to cool down and those that had stood
to make their points clear (the Weasley twins) sank back down slowly.

*BAM!*

The doors to the Great Hall slammed open. A large man with a limp strode into the hall. His wooden
leg clanked continuously against the polished floors, creating a tense tempo as he headed straight for
the head table heedless of the hundreds of eyes following him.

Harry, too, stared at the newcomer, his gaze burned into the man until he was able to get a glimpse
of his scarred face and deep etched scowl when the light from the hovering candles illuminated the
inside of his hood. Whispers escalated to shouts when the man dropped his hood and let out a mane
of knotted grey hair and exposed his face for all to see.

“Blimey, that’s Mad-Eye Moody right there,” gasped Ron. “My dad told me tons of stories about
him, says most of the Aurors now think he’s gone mental since he’s so paranoid all the time. I heard
he doesn’t sleep unless he’s got a knife in one hand and his wand in the other.”

Ron’s assessment was carried down the Gryffindor table. Harry’s classmates had leaned in closer to
his group of friends when they had heard Ron talk about the infamous Auror and were now liberally
staring at the man in question as he limped up to Professor Dumbledore.

Moody reached the head table and shook with the Headmaster. He leaned in to whisper something in
the old man’s ear before stalking off and taking a seat at the table next to Professor Snape who
scowled at the man and received an equally malicious glare in return.

“Ah yes!” Dumbledore exclaimed, “I seem to have forgotten in my haste to impart other news that
our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher will be none other than the famed former Auror,
Alastor Moody!”

There was a small smattering of applause. Dumbledore took his students’ hesitation in stride and
clapped along with those few conscious enough to bring their hands together.

“As I was saying before, there will be no Quidditch this year because the school will be taking part
in something much more grand and, dare I say it, spectacular. This year, after a century long wait,
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will be proud to host the Triwizard Tournament!”

Excited murmurs erupted in the hall. Friends turned towards each other to discuss this new piece of
information and in their enthusiasm barely caught the rest of Professor Dumbledore’s speech.
Harry listened with one ear to what the Headmaster was saying but kept the other one alert to the whispers which still circulated the Great Hall. The mention of this tournament hadn't come as a complete surprise to him—after all, isn't something like this exactly what he vision of Voldemort had hinted at?—but his reaction was decidedly much less enthusiastic than the rest of his classmates’.

As professor Dumbledore mentioned the monetary reward for winning the tournament, Harry took notice as his best friend’s eyes widened in clear interest. Ron was not the only one who seemed intrigued by the prospect as a good portion of the Hogwarts students were thinking along the same lines as the youngest male Weasley.

Harry could only shake his head at them. They had no idea what it was like to constantly be the centre of (unwanted) attention wherever they went, to be singled out from the rest of the population because of something he couldn't remember doing (and that had cost him the lives of his parents).

The Headmaster had finished his speech. Food materialized on the long tables and Harry was brought out of his stupor as Ron jostled him in his hurry to be the first to sample the marinated chicken wings. Scanning the assortment of dishes, he scooped large portions of everything that looked good on his plate and dug in.

“So waf zuy zink, may?” Ron asked around a mouthful of food.

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione complained, “could you please swallow before you attempt to start a conversation?”

“I'm a growing boy, Hermione, I need my strength. And look at Harry, he's eating almost as much as I am and you're not saying anything to him about it.”

“That's because he doesn't talk with his mouth full and spray the rest of us with bits of his meal.”

“Oi! I did not—”

“What was it you were asking me, Ron?” Not being in the mood of witnessing his friends have a go at one of their famous squabbles, Harry broke their argument before it could begin.

“Oh yeah, I was asking what you thought of the tournament. Pretty sweet, ain't it? I heard Fred and George from down the table talking about finding a way to put their names for the tournament. Can you imagine winning one thousand galleons?” Ron's eyes lost their focus as he stared off into the distance, no doubt imagining the things he would be able to do with all that money.

“I don't know, Ron. I think I've had enough excitement so far to last me a lifetime. I just want a quiet year for once and to watch the competition like everyone else. And anyhow, you heard about the age limit, you have to be over seventeen to even think about entering. How do you plan on passing the security wards that Dumbledore will most likely put in place himself?”

Ron visibly deflated a bit at that thought. “It's probably just something they said to scare us. Besides, wouldn't you want to be named the Hogwarts champion? I know I would.”

“You forget, Ron,” Ginny spoke up for the first time during the meal, “that in order to be named the champion, you first have to beat the other schools and survive the tasks.”

“And I, for one, agree with Harry wholeheartedly on this,” began Hermione. “I think it would be ridiculous to try and get into the tournament when you're not even of legal age to perform magic outside of school. You wouldn't stand a chance against the other champions, they have three years of education on you. I'm not entirely sure about the tournament in general but if the Ministry has approved and the rules have been reviewed by Professor Dumbledore then I suppose they've worked
hard to fix their past mistakes; especially if some of the things I've read about the past tournaments actually happened."

The wind had shifted in another direction and the sails on Ron's ship went limp. He grumbled a bit about his friends not having a sense of adventure before the food sitting on his plate became his main focus.

His friends followed his example and finished their meal in silence, the foursome then leaving the Great Hall together to head to their warm beds in Gryffindor Tower.

That year, September 1st had fallen on a Saturday, meaning that the students at Hogwarts had one day of rest left before classes started.

The less organized individuals spent the dreary day holed up inside their common rooms or the library, finishing off whatever assignments they hadn't done over the summer holidays. Those that had finished off everything they'd needed to do were relaxing or, in some very rare cases, studying ahead for that year.

Harry, surprising all of his friends, was one of the people seen studying ahead for that year and sparing some breaks in between reading books to relax with his friends or helping Ron finish his Charms essay. When asked what he was studying for, he wouldn't say. He'd only tell them that they'd find out soon enough and promptly left them to their own devices after supper, returning just before dinner time to an array of questions that he deflected using the same answer he'd given them before.

Luckily for him, Hermione, Ron and Ginny didn't have long to wonder about what was going on with their friend.

Monday morning dawned bright and grey in Scotland. Breakfast had been prepared by the house-elves hours before the students even thought about getting out of bed and was promptly sent up to the House tables as the first trickle started entering the hall with empty stomachs. Harry and his friends were still enjoying their breakfast by the time their Head of House reached them with their schedules for the year.

"Ms Granger, Mr Weasley, Ms Weasley and Mr Potter, here are your schedules for this scholastic year." She handed each of them a piece of square parchment. Her customary stern countenance broke for a few seconds and allowed a small smile to make its appearance. "Might I say congratulations, Mr Potter. Both Professors Babbling and Vector were especially pleased with your results and look forward to working with you this year," that said, she turned down the table to finish handing off the schedules.

"What did she mean by that, Harry?" pounced Hermione. "Why would the Ancient Runes and Arithmancy professors be working with you this year?"

"I wrote to Professor McGonagall over the summer to ask her about changing my electives and she said that I'd only be able to do it if I studied over the summer and passed last year's exam," said Harry reluctantly. "That's what I was doing yesterday when I disappeared after supper. I guess this means I passed."

Before anyone could say anything else, Ginny had thrown her arms around his shoulders and hugged him for all she was worth.
“I’m so proud of you, Harry!” She tightened her arms further and was even more pleased when he hugged her back with as much enthusiasm.

“Thanks, Gin.” He grinned at her and, without thinking about it, pecked her on the forehead.

They were not allowed to explore the incident further; Hermione had woken up from her momentary shock and was gushing over Harry’s success, wondering what his scores had been and offering her assistance any time if he needed help with anything.

Ron, on the other hand, appeared to be rather affronted at his friend’s choice of subject change. “I don’t understand, mate. Why would you want to give up easy grades in Care of Magical Creatures and Divination? I thought that’s why we decided to take those subjects together.” He didn’t bother masking the hurt in his tone.

“I’m tired of Trelawney predicting my death every time I enter her classroom and honestly, I don’t see how it’s helping either one of us to spend time coming up with fake dreams and look for the dog shaped blob in the bloody tea leaves. I should have told you before. I’m not dropping Care of Magical Creature though, so we still have that one together.”

Harry hated that his best friend was hurt by his actions but he’d agreed with Sirius and Remus that he’d stop hiding himself and start exploring what really interested him and not stick with what would let him pass by unnoticed. He didn’t have to do worse at school than Dudley any more.

“You do realize that now you’re leaving me to face that old hag all on my own?” Ron complained.

“I’m sure you’ll manage.”

They finished eating their breakfast and headed up to the Gryffindor tower to grab their bags—the school year had officially begun.
The weeks that followed were in equal parts unusual and ordinary.

The new classes that Harry had chosen were quick to live up to their reputations. Ancient Runes was completely fascinating to him. He was essentially learning to read and write in another language—the language of magic. Each symbol had a meaning of its own and would thereby invoke a specific amount and kind of magical response. Harry had spent hours pouring over the textbooks for the subject and had even gone so far as to buy extra reading material when they'd gone into Diagon Alley.

Arithmancy was similar to maths in the Muggle world. It was nothing compared to the farce that were Trelawney's lessons in predicting the future with tea leaves. Arithmancy actually explained how, through the use of complex numerology one could, in theory, predict the future. At first, Harry had been sceptic about the subject but as he'd casually perused through a book on the topic while in Grimmauld Place, he'd found that what was being taught actually had a basis in logic of the magical kind (it didn’t hurt in the least that it also made understanding potions a lot easier now that he understood knew the reasoning for precise measurements and ingredients). Oddly enough, the calculations in Arithmancy relaxed him, he enjoyed working on a complicated equation and even more so that he could do it quietly and by himself.

A subject that was taking a toll on him was Defence Against the Dark Arts. He didn't quite know what to make of the new professor. He respected what the man had accomplished in his years with the Auror force and understood that in the process of becoming known as the best Death Eater hunter in Britain he'd suffered numerous losses but Harry wasn't sure how much he agreed with his teaching methods.

The demonstration of the Avada Kedavra Curse had unearthed half-formed memories which had begun to haunt him in the long nights. And he hadn't been the only one affected, Neville had run the risk of passing out in class after seeing the Crucius performed. It had taken Hermione’s panicked yells to halt Professor Moody and put a definitive end to their lesson.

Harry had wanted to go to Neville after that (and say what? He didn’t know) but wasn't certain how the other boy would feel once he found out that Harry knew the reason for his aversion to the curse. Sirius and Remus had taken to telling him quite a lot over the summer and they'd touched on the subject of old Order members, recounting with halting breath the horrible fate of Hank and Alice Longbottom.

Even now, as he sat in Transfiguration class listening to Professor McGonagall explain the complexity behind transfiguring a guinea fowl into a guinea pig, he thanked his lucky stars that his parents were at rest and not lingering between two worlds like the elder Longbottoms.

“Mr Potter!” Professor McGonagall's call ruptured his daydream bubble.

“Yes, Professor?”

“Seeing as how you have taken the liberty of forgoing taking notes in this class, would you be so kind as to demonstrate to your classmates how to properly transfigure a guinea fowl into a guinea pig?” She arched one eyebrow and motioned for him to take out his wand.

Harry cleared his throat and said, “Certainly, Professor.”
Muttering the appropriate incantation under his breath and flicking his wand left, right and straight up, he watched as his guinea fowl lost its feathers and shrunk before turning into a mousy-eyed guinea pig.

One of Professor McGonagall’s eyes twitched, the only sign that she was caught by surprise at his success.

“Turn him blue for me, Mr Potter,” she wanted to see if it was just a fluke on his part but was again taken aback when the guinea pig turned blue within the blink of an eye. “Give him red spots.” Red dots appeared on its flesh, an ugly contrast with the blue hue. “Turn him back into a guinea fowl but leave the colours intact.”

As Harry worked to prove his worth, the entire class of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw fourth years examined the magic show with equal measures of disbelief and envy. They could not find an explanation as to how one of the most average students in their class for the past three years had suddenly risen up to the standards of Hermione Granger and some of the more proficient Ravenclaws.

The guinea fowl went through a number of transformations before Professor McGonagall called it quits and awarded Harry with twenty points, all the while piercing him with her eyes which looked more feline now than they did in her Animagus form.

Harry squirmed under the force of her stare but kept his eyes steady on her own. He could tell that the professor was surprised with his prowess and he was tempted to admit to her that it had always been there from the start, he’d just had good practice at hiding it. These skills had always been inside him, lying dormant while he pushed them back so he wouldn't stand out any further in the magical world than he already did.

Hermione shifted impatiently next to him and Harry realized with a resigned sigh that she was probably fit to bursting with the number of questions she must have for him—yet another reason for wanting to keep his true potential to himself. Hermione was, without a doubt, the smartest witch in their year and she had earned that title with everything she had; he never wanted to take that away from her.

The afternoon bell rang and the fourth year Transfiguration students rushed to the door, the delicious food laid out in the Great Hall begging them to hurry. Harry followed after his friends, feeling his professor's eyes tracing over him until he turned the corner, out of sight.

“Harry,” hissed Hermione, “what was that? How did you manage to do everything Professor McGonagall told you to do?” She wanted to blurt out how he'd managed to do it before her but bit her lip to hold back the question. Even she didn't think it would go over well.

“I just followed the instructions, Hermione. She'd explained it to us before and I did what she said to do.”

“Yes, but changing the animal back to its original form and keeping the same colours is something that we won't be learning until next month,” she insisted. “You shouldn't have been able to do that.”

“I'd read about it before in one of the books at Gri-home and decided to try it out and see how it went.” He shrugged and sat down on the bench, helping himself to some mashed potatoes and pork-chops after giving Ginny a warm smile.

Hermione's mouth fell open so wide that Ginny became worried she would catch flies.
“You mean you've never even done that spell before and got it exactly right on the first try?” she insisted.

“It’s not unheard of,” muttered Harry.

“No,” Hermione admitted reluctantly, “but it is highly improbable. When did—”

“Just leave it alone, 'Mione.” Ron said. “So he got it right the first time, big deal. It was probably some kind of fluke anyway and you have nothing to worry about.”

“What was a fluke?” asked Ginny.

“Nothing, I just did what Professor McGonagall told us to do,” said Harry.

“You did a good deal more than that,” Hermione muttered into her soup. “He performed magic that we aren’t supposed to learn until next month and he did it perfectly.”

“I don’t see what's so bad about that,” said Ginny uncertainly. “If Harry did so well then we should be congratulating him, no?” she then directed a pointed look at Hermione. “Congratulations then, Harry. I'm sure that was some impressive magic.” She pecked him on the cheek and couldn't help her lips from lingering on his skin a little longer than was platonically appropriate.

Harry coughed and willed the slight tinge of pink to recede from his face. “Anyway, enough about me. You lot excited about tomorrow? Dumbledore said that the other schools should be arriving just in time for dinner.”

“Ooh yes!” trilled Ginny. “I can't wait to see what the other schools are like. I've heard a lot of things about Durmstrang—a lot of it not good—but I don't know much about Beauxbatons, just that mum didn't want to send me there because she said it was too far away.” Ginny's eyes had lit up with excitement and her hands were waving about her as she spoke.

Latching onto the topic, Hermione forgot all about her irritation with Harry and proceeded to inform them of everything she'd read about the two schools since finding out about their impending arrival. She didn't notice how Ron's eyes slowly lost their focus the longer she talked, she had the two politely interested faces of Harry and Ginny listening to her.

---

The cool air nipped at their robes while they waited outside with frosted breath for the two magical schools to arrive. All of Hogwarts was out bundled together on the grounds, spread along the grass and on the steps to the castle, shivering in their clothes and keeping their eyes peeled for any sign announcing the schools’ arrival.

They didn't know where they'd arrive from. Some guessed the skies whilst others ventured to think that they would sail on the water. A few even threw around the idea that Durmstrang would ride in on brooms, led by their most famous of students, the legendary Viktor Krum.

The professors were standing at the front of the gathered group, their feet teetering on the edge of the platform jutting into the lake as they spoke amongst themselves and gazed out at the still water. Snippets of conversations were caught every now and then as the students had their patience tested and started wondering whether these strangers would even bother to show up at all.

Harry and his friends were standing on the stairs leading to their school, accompanied by other members of their year such as Neville, Dean, Seamus, the Parvati sisters and Lavender, to name a few. To Harry's right stood Ginny. Although they had not yet reached the height of winter in
Scotland, the biting chill circling the country was enough excuse to huddle close to each other for warmth and they ended up pressed against each other, side to side, while they spoke to their respective friends.

“Over there!” Neville shouted, pointing high up in the sky. “Look! There's something flying over here!”

Hundreds of pairs of eyes squinted at the small, dark speck on the horizon. It gradually became larger and larger the closer to the school that it flew.

“It's a plane!” A Muggle-born student, no doubt.

“No, it's a dragon! They're riding dragons!” Harry wondered how that person saw a dragon in a small dot in the sky.

As it got close enough to fly over the lake, it was clear to see that the object was neither a dragon nor a plane—it was a carriage. A carriage as big as a house, but a carriage nonetheless. They watched as it made its descent to earth led by a dozen winged horses and suspended by magic herself.

It crashed on the ground gracefully, the hooves of the horses kicking up small patches of grass as it did so, and continued rolling down the grass for some feet before coming to a standstill.

The students of Hogwarts stood in awe, taking in the ten foot high carriage that had landed on their lawn. It was beautiful in its intricacy, patterns of gold and silver designs welded onto the powder blue surface, its large four wheels holding the monstrosity two feet above the ground.

Albus Dumbledore walked up to the door of the carriage while the conductor opened it with a grand flourish, then stepped aside for the Hogwarts Headmaster to take the lead. A long, heeled leg stepped out of the vehicle followed by the largest woman Harry had seen in his entire life. She was thin, bordering on bony, her figure defined by bones and edges, the only softness to her body being her hair which reached the bottom of her ears and framed her face with soft, brown locks.

Towering over Dumbledore by a good half a metre or so, Madame Maxime managed to gracefully exit her carriage with nigh a stumble and grab a hold of the Headmaster’s hand in warm greeting.

“Albus Dumblydorr,” she purred, “It iz zo good to see you. You aire doing well I ’ope, non?”

“Madame Maxime,” Dumbledore bowed till the tip of his nose touched his lime green slippers. “As always, it is a pleasure. It has been far too long since we last saw each other properly. I am doing wonderfully as of late, I hope you find yourself similarly blessed.”

“Oui oui. However, it 'as been such a long journey for all of us, I fear my students and I aire not used to ze Scottish weazer,” she shivered in her fur coat and waved a pan sized hand back to the carriage.

One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped out. Their light blue uniforms were form-fitting and sheer, not at all appropriate for the Scottish weather as Madame Maxime had stated. They shook on the spot, their teeth chattering madly as they cursed the bitter wind in furious French when it ruffled their skirts and pulled at their short scarves.

“Of course, please, make yourselves at home and head inside the castle where it is much warmer. I am sure Karkaroff would not mind if you were not here to greet him and Hagrid would be more than happy to take care of your Abraxan horses. He is our groundskeeper and Care of Magical Creatures professor, so rest assured that they will be well taken care of.”

Hagrid had stepped up beside Dumbledore and interrupted his ogling of the giant woman to puff his
chest out proudly at Headmaster’s praise.

“Aye madam, ye have nothin’ ta worry about,” he puffed out, “I ken my way ’round these beauties ‘ere. They’ll want for nothin’.”

The Headmistress made a few last remarks to Hagrid before jutting out her chin and motioning for her students to follow as she marched to the castle. As they passed by the groups of students, one girl in particular seemed to catch the eye of every boy—and some girls—in the vicinity. They stared, drooled and pinched themselves at the apparition before them, for something so beautiful and perfect could not possibly be of this world, they thought.

Puzzled, Harry watched as Ron stumbled forward in his haste to get a better look of the golden haired beauty walking stiffly up the steps to the entrance of the castle. His best friend's eyes were sparkling with lust; he nearly bowled over the people standing in front of them in his efforts to follow the girl's path.

“Hermione, what's going on? Why is everyone acting so strange?”

Indeed, even Neville was held captive by the witch's spell.

“I've read about something like this before. She can’t be a Siren, those only live in water and Beauxbatons would hardly allow magical creatures to attend their school, so I suppose that leaves…” Hermione rubbed her bottom lip with the pad of her thumb, lost in thought. “Veela. She must only be part Veela though. Witches like her are rumoured to be able to ensnare even the most virtuous of men and yet, you don't seem that much affected by her. It's almost as if you're already in—” She cut herself off before she could say any more, her eyes widening as she reached her own conclusion.

“As if I'm already what?” She shook her head. “What were you about to say?”

Harry noticed her eyes flash to Ginny before landing back on him.

“It's nothing you have to worry about, Harry. You'll find out soon enough, I reckon.” She faced away from him then and tried to ignore the pathetic sight of Ron nearly climbing over the people in front of him to keep the part Veela witch in his sights.

The Beauxbatons entourage were welcomed warmly into Hogwarts and disappeared just in time for the Durmstrang Institute to steal the spotlight.

The other school took to the water instead of the air and arrived on board submarine ships. They reminded Harry of the pirate ships that his cousin Dudley liked to play with when he was younger, minus the black flag with the skull and crisscrossing bones.

The Headmaster of Durmstrang reminded Harry of a pirate as well with his black pointed moustache and triangular beard which was in great contrast with his pale skin and electric blue eyes. He wore a dark fur coat and was about the same height as Dumbledore, though obviously much younger in years.

“Igor Karkaroff! It has been years since I've last seen you and I see that time has been very generous to you.” Dumbledore smiled at him genially and shook the man’s hand with two of his.

“Yes, Dumbledore, I have been well. The position of Headmaster has suited me greatly.” Karkaroff replied in a deep, scratchy voice. The wizard made an effort to greet most of the professors as Dumbledore made the introductions but, to Harry's great curiosity, made a point not to venture too close to the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor and, in fact, went out of his way to avoid the man.
“I know that the weather in Bulgaria is similar, if not worse, than that here in Scotland but that is no reason to stand out in the cold,” said Dumbledore. “Why don't you show your students inside? The welcoming feast will commence shortly.”

Karkaroff nodded in response and grabbed ahold of his most prized student: Viktor Krum. Together, they led their school into the halls of Hogwarts to a chorus of dazzled and excited whispers, Ron being the most embarrassingly vocal in his accolade.

Once the last of the Durmstrang party had disappeared into the castle, the residents of Hogwarts, having nothing left to steal their fancy, began following them inside.

Everyone had finished their meal already after having enjoyed the display put on by the welcomed visitors. Hogwarts had been surprised by the discipline displayed by the Durmstrang Institute and the outright adoration shown from the Beauxbatons Academy towards their Headmistress.

The feast had been cleared away by magic, the elves no doubt working overtime to accommodate the needs of not only their regular students, but also the two new schools that they were hosting.

Harry wiped his mouth with his napkin and patted his stomach in satisfaction, noting that Ron had taken up a similar position to his but whereas he had succumbed to the post food bliss, Harry kept his wits about himself and observed the newcomers from afar.

The Durmstrang boys had chosen to sit on the other side of the Great Hall amongst the Slytherin house. Since their arrival some hours ago, Harry had been subjected to all sorts of stories about school life at Durmstrang, particularly their openness to teaching the Dark Arts. Naturally most of the students at Hogwarts had been equal parts hesitant and excited to meet the Durmstrang boys but their reticence had allowed them to be beaten to the punch by the Slytherin house.

Beauxbatons was a different matter. They were all beautiful witches and wizards—though none held a candle to the half Veela named Fleur Delacour—and all of them had taken their OWLs in their sixth year rather than their fifth, like at Hogwarts, a fact which Hermione had bemoaned about. She was jealous they had an entire extra year to go over the curriculum and had half a mind to put together a petition to do the same at Hogwarts.

For his part, Harry didn’t envy the Hogwarts champion who would be lucky (or unlucky, as Harry thought of it) enough to be competing against the two new schools.

“Ladies, gentlemen and dearly departed ghosts!” boomed Dumbledore. “It is our pleasure to present you with the very beginnings of the Triwizard Tournament.” Applause broke out in the hall just in time for the caretaker of the castle, Argus Filch, to make his presence known as he pushed through the doors of the Great Hall and stumbled to the front of the head table. Behind him, he was pulling on a bulk the size of a medium sized dog covered with a white cloth.

“Thank you, Mr Filch,” Dumbledore glided down from the raised platform to stand beside the curious object. “This,” he uncovered a silver goblet with a flourish and used a little wandless magic to make the cloth disappear—“is the Triwizard goblet. This is where prospective champions of all three schools will be placing their names to be judged by the flames in the Goblet of Fire.”

A jab of Dumbledore’s wand and electric blue flames erupted from the mouth of the goblet.

“To prevent repeating mistakes from the past, an Age Line will be drawn around the chalice, permitting only those above seventeen years of age to place their names inside. I, myself, will be the
“Ladies and gentlemen, let me warn you that this is no decision to take lightly. Once your name has been entered, the flames will choose whether or not you are worthy to partake in the Tournament. This is a binding, magical contract that cannot be broken by any other means other than participating in the three tasks that will be set before you.” Dumbledore lowered his glasses down his nose and looked at the crowd over his half moon spectacles. “There is no going back. Whatever decision is made will be a permanent one. I will be drawing the Age Line myself,” —his eyes briefly made contact with Harry's and the young man stared back steadily— “to ensure your safety and protect the Tournament's validity. Mr Crouch and Mr Bagman will be here throughout the year to oversee this competition, offering the Ministry's aid and support.

“You have twenty four hours to place your name in the goblet. At dinner tomorrow night, the champions will have been chosen and the names will be read. Good luck to you all and may the Tournament begin!”

The fire in the goblet flared a bright white and rose a metre in height before settling down again to a comfortable blue.

Chancing a look at his friends, Harry could see that the Headmaster's speech had had some effect on them. Their bravado had slipped down a few pegs and they no longer looked ready to possibly throw their lives away to the will of the Tournament. Even the twins seemed to be thinking twice about it. Harry gave them tonight before the effect wore off and they were back to their scheming.

“Well,” muttered Ginny, “that was intense, to say the least.”

“You're right about that,” said Hermione.

“Did you see how he stared at me when he said that he was going to be drawing the Age Line himself?” asked Harry. “It's like he expects me to want to enter the Tournament. You'd think he'd know better by now.”

“I'm sure it was just a coincidence, Harry. He probably didn't mean anything by it.”

Harry wasn't so sure he agreed with Hermione on that one.

“You've got to admit though, you do have a tendency of running into all sorts of trouble in school. What else did you expect?” Ginny offered him small smile to take the sting out of her words.

“Yeah, I guess you're right. But it's not like I go out deliberately looking for Dark wizards to chase after me. Trouble just happens to find me wherever I go.”

“You're telling me, mate.” Ron sighed. “I don't think I'll ever forgive you for taking me to see Aragog and his merry band of carnivorous Acromantulas hell-bent on making us their breakfast.”

Ginny stiffened next to Harry at the mention of her first year. She tried her best to relax but her warring emotions wouldn't let her. A warm hand shot out of nowhere and grasped her knee, squeezing in a comforting manner.

She sneaked a glance at Harry but he didn't give any outward sign of what he’d done. She followed his lead and quietly placed her hand over his, gave it a squeeze, then turned back to the conversation like nothing had happened.
The twenty four hours following the Tournament’s announcement flew by in a flash of activity. The twins, true to their word, had tried to break through the wards set up by Dumbledore using an Ageing Potion they’d brewed themselves. The school had watched, amused, as they were unceremoniously spit out of the marked area and flung away like used dolls. Their new white hair and beard had been subject of much joking as they’d scurried out of the Great Hall, blaming each other for their failure to trick the smartest and most talented wizard of the age.

Currently, Harry and his friends were walking back to the Great Hall, having already eaten dinner a while ago and gone for a short stroll around the castle to settle their stomachs. They sat down at the Gryffindor table and waited for the last of the students to arrive.

The chalice was situated in the same place it had been since the night before. Many a student had placed their name inside and now the flames were flickering different colours as the magic took its time deliberating. The flames shifted suddenly; red and orange replaced white and blue and the fire rose high in body. A charred piece of parchment was spit out, drifting down softly to the hands of the Hogwarts Headmaster.

“The champion for Durmstrang Institute is,” he paused, “Viktor Krum!”

Stomping feet, clapping hands and cheers followed the world famous Seeker as he marked his path to a door on the side of the Great Hall, receiving pats on the shoulder from those brave enough to dare touch the stoic Bulgarian and a proud nod from his Headmaster.

As soon as he exited the Great Hall, everyone turned their attention back to the goblet. The flames spit out a second name.

“The champion for Beauxbatons Academy is Fleur Delacour!”

The same amount of enthusiasm was doled out to the French half Veela. She primly strode to the marked door, her head held high with pride, her steps never faltering.

“Lastly, the champion for Hogwarts School of Magic and Wizardry is,” —Hogwarts held its breath and teetered on the edge of their seats— “Cedric Diggory!”

Hufflepuff made sure to congratulate their champion the loudest, their pride to be housing the Hogwarts champion shining through their every gesture. The young man grinned through his nerves and took no time to follow the same path the other two contestants had taken.

“Well,” Dumbledore said, “this has been an exciting turnout, I must say. As per Tournament rules, the champions will now receive their instructions for the—” but his words were cut short.

The flames within the goblet seemed to be acting up. To Harry, it looked as though the magic had hit some sort of overload, like when Dudley had saved too many games in his new electronic toy and it had gone all sorts of mad before fizzling out and dying. To Harry’s—and everyone else’s—astonishment, a fourth piece of parchment flew out, still smoking from its charred edges.

Dumbledore caught it deftly between his nimble fingers and inspected the name scrawled in ink. Minutes passed without a sound escaping from the Headmaster and everyone was starting to visibly get nervous.

“Harry Potter.”

The name was carried from mouth to mouth after it left through Dumbledore’s lips. Heads turned in
his direction and Harry could do nothing but stare, resigned and dumbfounded, at the Headmaster. He looked around himself, seeking support from his friends, but found betrayal pouring from Ron’s eyes and abject horror radiating from Hermione.

“Harry Potter.” A soft hand guided him to standing position and urged him to walk up to the Dumbledore.

He could practically feel the pointed daggers stabbing at him from all sides. The professors stared at him from their perch at the long table, their faces aiming for the perfectly composed and failing somewhere along the way. Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen Professor Sprout looking so cross before.

With feet weighing just as heavily as his heart, Harry spared one last look back at his friends, receiving only a shaky smile from Ginny, before heading inside a warm room and shutting the door behind him. With his back stuck to the door, he could make out the exact moment the school shook off its shock and broke out in angry protests and accusations.

“What iz it, boy? Do zey need us back at ze ‘all already?” asked Ms Delacour.

“I—I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. They're...they're probably on their way here now.” Harry didn't bother with saying anything else and sank down on the armchair in front of the roaring fireplace.

They'd barely been alone for more than two minutes before the doors burst open and a furious looking Olympe Maxime and Igor Karkaroff marched in, They headed for their respective students. Professors McGonagall, Snape, Dumbledore and Moody followed soon after along with Mr Crouch and Mr Bagman.

“What is the meaning of this, Dumbledore?!” Karkaroff demanded. “Last I checked the hosting school was not allowed two champions! The Tournament has barely even started and already you are seeking to win through underhanded means.” He patted his student on the shoulder, as though he were the one in need of calming down, and glared at Dumbledore.

“I’ave to say zat I agree, Dumblydorr. If you ’ad told us zat we could ’ave anozer champion then we would ’ave ’ad ze goblet choose one more,” said Madame Maxime. “But zis, zis is complètement unfair! ’Ogwarts wiz two champions!”

Dumbledore nodded resignedly and pinched his nose to stave off the oncoming headache.

“Believe me, Olympe, Igor, that I would never condone something like this. I drew that Age Line myself, I set up the wards meant to protect the goblet from such trickery and I do not know how it could have been fooled.”

“I didn't do it.”

Everyone turned at the first words to come out of Harry's mouth since they'd walked into the room. He was leaning forward, bracing his arms on his legs, head bent down, posture defeated.

“I didn't put my name in the goblet,” he stated. “I never wanted to in the first place and I didn't ask anyone to do it for me either. I just wanted to go about the year like everyone else and watch the Tournament from the stands. I just wanted a quiet year for once,” the last sentence was whispered into the room and the women present could not help but feel a tugging in their hearts at the sad sight the boy presented.

“Headmaster,” Snape drawled out, “while I do not doubt that Potter would go to all sorts of lengths
to remain the centre of attention and feed his unquenchable ego, I fail to see how a boy of no more than fourteen years of age could have fooled the magic protecting the goblet.”

Leave it to Snape to defend him while still managing to insult him in the same breath, thought Harry.

“Nor can I, Severus. It seems we have an unprecedented problem in our hands. What do you think, Alastor?”

“I think the boy better be watching his back from now on,” said the gruff professor. “Only way I could see this happening is if someone over-age entered him themselves, tricking the goblet into believing that he formed part of a fourth school competing in the Tournament. Only very powerful, if not Dark, magic could have done that. Someone obviously does not want young Mr Potter to finish his fourth year alive.”

With that said, his magical eye swivelled in its socket and examined each and every individual in the room. When pointed at Snape, the man only sneered in the ex-Auror's face before transferring his attention to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sighed. “I concur.”

A brief silence fell in the room but was broken by Mr Bagman who clapped his hands once, then rubbed them together.

“Well well well. I don't know about all of you, but this is turning out to be one of the most exciting Tournaments of all time. Not only do we have a fourth contestant in our hands,” he gestured at the still Harry, “it also turns out that he is none other than The Boy Who Lived himself! How exciting this has turned out to be, I must say. I cannot wait to see how he handles himself competing against older and wiser opponents.”

“Surely you are not serious, Mr Bagman,” huffed McGonagall. “Mr Potter cannot compete in the Tournament. He is far behind his peers in magical education and has neither the experience or skills to compete against the other champions.”

“There is nothing we can do about that now, Minerva. The rules of the Tournament have already been drawn and the tasks decided. Had we not done that beforehand, then perhaps we could have done something to rectify the situation now but, alas, that is not the case.” Dumbledore spoke to his Deputy Headmistress in low, defeated tones for he knew exactly which dangers Harry would have to face.

“The decision has been made,” Mr Crouch announced. “There is nothing else we can do now except continue on with the Tournament as if nothing has changed. The rules remain the same for everyone, as do the three tasks. Harry Potter will compete.”

His announcement made, the man fastened his cloak around himself and walked out of the room, leaving the door to slam shut behind him.

The remaining individuals continued chattering away amongst themselves even after the Ministry employee had left. Harry remained isolated in his warm corner. He felt like he should be more shocked, more angry. He should be throwing things around the room, demanding to be taken out of the competition and shouting from the highest tower at Hogwarts that he did not place his name in the Goblet of Fire.

Funny thing was that he felt like doing none of those things. His energy was drained, he was tired beyond measure, a type of mental exhaustion that wouldn't simply fade away after a little sleep. All
those hours in Defence class with Moody and he'd forgotten the one thing that he kept drilling into them every day.

*Constant vigilance!*

“Mr Potter... Potter... Harry!” Professor McGonagall's agitated call reached him through thick water, distorted and incomprehensible at first before his head broke out of the surface of the tides and he found her looking down on of him through thick rimmed glasses.

“I'm sorry, Professor. What did you say?”

“I said that you best be heading back to your dormitory now, Mr Potter. It is well past your curfew. I am sure your friends are waiting anxiously for your arrival.”

Bobbing his head like a puppet on strings, he walked out of the room without sparing a second glance to anyone. He didn't want to glean their thoughts from their cold eyes and stiff backs. All he wanted to do was to lie down in his bed and sleep for a long while—so long that he would wake up after the Tournament was over.

He didn't remember giving the Fat Lady the password to the common room. He could recall the cheers that greeted him once he arrived and the surge of fury that he felt because of it. He hadn't said anything to anyone, just pushed through the mess of people to the stairs. Many of his friends tried to get him to stay, to encourage him to confess his secret to fooling the Goblet of Fire, but he shook them off and stormed past them, ignoring their protests.

The covers of his bed were pulled down swiftly. Harsh words were exchanged between him and Ron but he would be lying if he said that he remembered much of it by the time his head hit the pillow. Having changed into his pyjamas, he crawled into bed and only allowed himself to relax once the sheets covered him up to his chin and he'd finished the habit of sorting his thoughts and memories behind their respective doors in his mind.

He ignored the angry huffs and mutterings coming from Ron’s bed.

Harry shut his eyes and slept.
Chapter 14

The time which followed the selection of the champions was something out of a nightmare for Harry. His best friend's jealousy had reached such an all-time high that he'd abandoned Harry in favour of smearing his name along with the majority of the school.

To make matters more complicated, Hermione felt torn between her two best friends and spent her time going back and forth between the two, trying to get them to apologize to each other and return to their easy friendship. Harry absolutely refused to apologize on principle; he knew he'd done nothing wrong and while he understood where his best mate was coming from, he was not prepared to dole out a fake apology in the hopes that things would go back to normal just like that.

The roots of Ron's insecurities ran much deeper than a simple apology could cure, so Harry knew that it would only serve as a temporary band-aid before his hot-headed friend found something else that he took a bother to. Each day Hermione was becoming more and more frustrated and Harry wished he could help his long-time friend, he truly did, but he knew that nothing but time would serve to heal the rift between himself and Ron.

He also thanked his lucky stars many times throughout the weeks that they had considered him worthy enough to send Ginny Weasley his way. She hadn't doubted for a second that he was telling the truth about the Goblet and had been one of his main sources of comfort as the debacle only got worse as the days dragged by.

As a result of his estrangement from Ron, and Hermione's back and forth dance between them, Harry had been forced to realize just how small and concentrated his circle of friends was. Seeing as how the entire school was against him—minus the Gryffindors, but he couldn't take the constant congratulations and pleads for a retell of the fabulous story behind his success—Harry was left with only Ginny to hold onto during the day and the few encoded letters and Floo calls with Remus and Sirius late at night.

That particular train of thought caused him to remember their reaction when he told them about the Tournament and their advice moving forward.

It was late at night; way past the Hogwarts students' bedtime. Harry had managed to creep down the stairs without waking any of his bunk mates and currently waited in front of the fireplace in the common room.

The clock on the wall mutely marked two o'clock.

Kneeling down, he took out his wand and muttered an incantation. Flames tinged a beautiful blue erupted from the onyx coals; they lit up a small portion of the room with an eerie, almost cold, light, nothing like the comforting warmth from a rich, psychedelic fire. Rubbing his hands to the warmth of the flickering flames, Harry waited impatiently for the clock to strike two thirteen.

The minute hand almost seemed to mock Harry as it took its own delicious time advancing on time marks. Eventually, the hand struck home and the flames changed colour. Now a vibrant green, Harry leaned forward and muttered another indecipherable spell before throwing in a handful of Floo powder, to which the flames flared brighter, bigger and angrier, cackling madly in the old silence of the room.
However, as abruptly as they began their mad whispering, they cooled down and receded to half their size, cowering in the small confines of the stone fireplace.

“Harry! Harry, is that you?” Sirius' eyes squinted from his fiery green head.

“Yeah, it's me.” Harry whispered back. “How are you? Is Remus doing alright?”

“You mean how are we handling being cooped up in the place I vowed to never return to after I ran away?” Sirius gave a wolfish grin. “I guess I can't complain much, it certainly beats my homey old cell in Azkaban, that's for sure.”

It was moments like these that Harry didn't know how to respond to his godfather's flippant attitude. So he let it slide and forged on.

“Listen, I don't have much time left so we need to talk about the Triwizard Tournament now.”

His godfather's face fell and his eyes grew sad and sombre. “So it's true then,” he whispered, “your name really did come out of the Goblet.” His voice was hoarse, his eyes were cloudy and his head hung down a fraction, as though having the knowledge confirmed by his godson physically weighed him down.

Harry cleared his throat, only slightly uncomfortable at Sirius' show of emotion. “It did. I swear I didn't enter myself in the Tournament. You know I wouldn't take the risk with my life, not after...” He didn't mention the prophecy by name; he didn't have to.

“We know, Harry.” Sirius assured him then cocked his head to the side, listening to something being said on his side of the call. “Remus says to tell you to be careful. Don't make stupid mistakes and keep your head straight. Take care of yourself and as soon as you know what the first task is, you tell us. We won't be able to go and see you,” he almost looked pained at the impossibility, “but we can help you research ways to stay alive.”

“I'll tell you as soon as I know,” said Harry.

“Good good,” his head tilted to the side again. “Alice sends her worries and encouragement. She says not to forget what she taught you and that you better be meditating every night or you won't like what she'll do to you once she gets your hands on you.” Sirius finished with a mock glare of his own, one which he couldn't keep up and turned to a grin.

“She's there with you now? Isn't it too late to still be working?”

His godfather abruptly looked away from his godson's eyes only to flash back to them just as quickly. “We stayed up late working and when she heard that you were calling she decided to stay and see you. You're right though, it is late. She'll probably spend the night in one of the spare rooms. You know the one Dobby had cleaned out and painted yellow, it's got a big bed and a bathroom so she'll be comfortable there...” His voice trailed off at the end of his rambling and Harry could have sworn he heard some laughter in the background.

“Well, alright.” Something strange was going on and he had his suspicions about what it was but he didn't want to say anything. Whatever it was – if it was anything in the first place – Sirius would tell him eventually. “I have to go now. I don't want to talk to you for too long just in case.”

“Alright, pup. Promise you'll keep two eyes open in front of you and three on your back. We don't know who did this to you or why but I can promise you that it's not because he loves you so damn much and wants to see you win.” Sirius snarked.
“I'll be careful,” Harry promised. “See you around, Padfoot.”

“See you, pup.”

Their advice resonated in his head as he wandered the castle.

Alone.

Harry loathed to admit it, but he really hadn't been that much better at making friends at Hogwarts than at the Muggle schools he'd been to before turning eleven. Hermione refusing to take sides in the argument coupled with her studious nature meant that whenever she had a minute of free time, she would spend it at the library quietly studying instead of feeling forced to pick which of her best friends she would spend the day with. As for Ginny, she had her own classes to get to, her own homework to complete and her own small circle of friends to spend time with. This meant that for a great majority of the day, save supper and dinner, Harry was left to his own devices.

As he strode down the hall alone on a Saturday afternoon, Harry couldn't help but feel that if he ignore the fact that he was walking down the halls of a magical castle with a magical faculty, inside a magical community, this would be exactly like how his other schools were like. The majority of the school still made fun of him; still hated him; still thought he was a freak. He still felt lonely when he went to bed at night and when he woke up in the morning.

If a magical frisbee hadn't just whizzed by his ear, and if his first instinct hadn't been to take out his wand and blast the object off the air, he could have easily convinced himself that nothing had changed in the last four years.

A sudden yelp coming from behind him jolted him out of his morose thoughts. Glancing back, he noted with automatic surprise that the flying toy had hit the most unlucky boy in school over his head.

While the students surrounding him were too busy laughing at the shy boy's misfortune, Harry walked up to him and knelt down to help pick up his fallen books. Startled, the boy jerked up with wide eyes, only to relax upon seeing a familiar face.

“Thanks, Harry,” said Neville, some colour reaching his cheeks in embarrassment.

“It's no problem, Neville. You're my friend, I'm happy to help.”

Harry offered Neville a hand in standing up. The boy gratefully held on and allowed himself to receive some much needed help.

“I swear, these things only seem to happen to me. It's never a good day where I'm concerned,” Neville complained.

“You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Nev. I used to be just as clumsy as you were when I was younger,” Harry admitted.

“How did you get over it then?”

The boys had started walking down the hall together as they talked.

“I guess I just grew out of it.” Harry didn't tell Neville that the reason he was so clumsy was because he was always suffering from a beating. Or that he'd learned not to stumble, fall or trip as soon as he
was old enough to understand that getting hurt by accident and inconveniencing his aunt and uncle in the slightest would encourage Vernon to add to the number of bruises littering his body. Or that, according to his medical and school records, he'd never grown out of his clumsiness.

“You're lucky then. I don't think this will ever be over for me. My grandmother always said I was born with two left feet and just shy of being a squib, unlike my father” Neville lamented.

The beginnings of a plan began to form in Harry's head.

“Listen, Nev, I know this will sound a bit bonkers to you but, if you want, I can teach you something that might help you keep your balance better. I've tried it this summer and I was a bit sceptical at first but it really does help you.”

“What is it, Harry?” Neville looked intrigued but Harry hesitated a bit before continuing.

“I can teach you to dance ballet,” Harry said.

“I'm sorry, what?”

Harry grimaced. He knew it wasn't a very popular activity among men, and even less so among wizards, so he knew very well where Neville's doubt was coming from.

“I felt the exact same way that you did but trust me, it really does work.” Harry hesitated briefly before adding, “And it can come in real handy I duelling.”

That grabbed Neville's attention more than anything else Harry had said. It was no secret that he was more often than not found lacking when it came to his wand work, so to hear from someone he trusted that there might be a solution to him becoming an average dueller – well, there wasn't much more that Neville needed to hear.

“I guess it wouldn't hurt to try,” Neville began, “but where would we do it? We can't just start dancing in the middle of the common room.”

“There are empty classrooms all over the castle, I'm sure we could find at least one during lunch or whenever we have a free slot in our schedule.” Harry reasoned. “We could meet up one or two times a week for an hour and that's it.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan,” Neville nodded. Now that there was more of a firm idea in place, Neville realized that he was looking forward to these lessons, if for no other reason than the fact that maybe he'd just made a new friend.

Harry nodded as well, excited at the prospect of gaining back some normality from Neville's friendship.

Together, they walked down the corridor, their day having taken an unexpected turn for the better. And as they talked, they realized that they had more in common than they ever realized, which came as quite a shock to them both, though neither of them admitted it to each other.

Rounding the corner, they stopped just in time to not bump into two girls going the opposite way. Luckily, Harry wasn't so absorbed in his conversation as to not notice who one of the other girls was.

“Gin!” He exclaimed, then cursed at himself for sounding way too excited.

“Harry!” She flashed him a radiant smile. “It feels like I haven't seen you in so long.”
He grinned at that, glad that he wasn't the only one eager to see the other. “Well, we'll have to remedy that soon then.” Harry had no idea where these flashes of bravery came from but if they always made Ginny smile that much wider and look at him in that particular way of hers, then he hoped that they never ceased to come to him.

“So we will,” she bit her lip to contain her smile and started to say something else but stopped herself before she could. Instead, she turned to her friend and said “Luna, these are my friends, Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. Harry, Neville, I'd like you to meet my friend, Luna Lovegood. She's in the same year that I am, but she's in Ravenclaw.”

Luna Lovegood was a girl with big blue eyes and unruly, blonde – almost white – hair. Her nose was small and pointed and her lips were a thin, light pink. Her features were so small and delicate that they made her eyes bulge out of her head that much more and, for a second, she almost reminded Harry of Dobby. She had that air of innocence and pureness about her that Harry felt uncomfortable being around. He almost felt like just his mere presence would somehow dim her light.

“Harry Potter,” her light, airy voice fit in well with her overall appearance, “it is so nice to finally put a face to the boy Ginny has been talking about all this time. I always pictured you to be smaller though; must be all the Filosteeds stuck to your body that helped you grow.” She said.

“I'm sorry, all the what?” Harry was truly baffled by what the girl said.

“Filosteeds. They're little yellow creatures with big heads that stick to your limbs and fight off the Wakamees that try sting you and suck your bone marrow,” she said all this with such a serious expression on her face that Harry was struck dumb by how he should respond. He looked to Neville for help but he seemed just as stupefied as he was. “And Neville Longbottom,” she paused, “I can't say that I've heard many good things about you – probably because of the Wrackspurts fluttering around your head, What I hear are mostly mean things, like the things my classmates say about me when they think I'm not listening to them.”

An awkward silence ensued, one which Luna didn't seem to be bothered by but everyone else felt suffocated by it. Thankfully, Ginny seemed to be far more used to her friend's mannerisms by now and knew how to move past it.

“So,” Ginny drawled, “this is Luna. She and I were just headed to the lake to spend some time outside with the giant squid, if you guys want to join us.”

Harry and Neville glanced at each other and shrugged, it's not like they had anything better planned. So they turned direction and followed the girls outside.

It was a wonderful day outside. A cold breeze was blowing in from the west but it was tempered a few scattered rays of sunlight and warmth. The dew on the grass had evaporated almost entirely since early that morning, only leaving the slightest sliver of fog hanging over the water in the lake.

They four of them walked along the shore in companionable silence until they reached a fallen log large enough sit the four of them comfortably. Luna started wondering aloud about the sea creatures found underwater and the types of plant that they might eat, which sprouted an enthusiastic response from Neville, who was never more in his element than when discussing Herbology.

“You know, I think this is the first time I've met one of your friends and yet, you know all of mine,” Harry told Ginny.

“Well, it's not that hard to meet all your friends, Harry. You only have the two,” she teased him.

“And well, you met Luna already so yeah, that pretty much sums up all my friends. Congratulations,
you've met them all.”

Harry was shocked. He figured someone as bright, funny and kind as Ginny would have dozens of people lining up to spend time with her so he told her as much.

“It's difficult to make friends when half your classmates think that you were once possessed by a demon during your first year and the other half think you turned Dark at the age of eleven,” she said.

“Possessed by a demon? Where did they get that from? The only people who know what actually happened in your first year would never say anything about it and Dumbledore made it clear that you had nothing to do with it.” He felt like marching up to the great hall right now and demanding in front of everyone how they could possibly think that Ginny would turn Dark.

“Rumours fly, Harry. It wouldn't matter if you told them what actually happened because they'd just keep believing whatever it is that they want to believe.” She nearly whispered to him.

“That's not fair, Gin. You shouldn't be judged by something that they know nothing about,” Harry knew that if there was one thing he hated the most about being famous, is that everyone who knew him didn't know him at all. He never thought that Ginny would be going through something similar.

“I've learned to deal with it, Harry. Just as I'm sure you learned to deal with your own batch of admirers.” If her sarcasm hadn't been so strong, her smirk would have given her away. Then her expression changed, she became more thoughtful as she gazed into his eyes at something far beyond what he could see. “I've known Luna since I can remember. She lives close to the Burrow and her mum and dad used to bring her over for playdates all the time. When I came back from the Chamber,” she swallowed, “she was the only one who believed me without me needing to say a single thing to her. She just looked at me with those eyes and said 'Oh Ginny', then she hugged me. That summer was full of hugs like that.”

Her eyes had turned glassy and her voice had dropped a couple decibels lower. With the sun glinting off her hair, her face so vulnerable and her stance so strong, Harry had never seen her look so beautiful before.

“I'm sorry,” he said before he could stop himself. He cleared his throat and continued, “I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you when you clearly needed someone to be.”

“I never blamed you,” she started, “and my family was there for me when they could be but even they didn't really understand what I'd been through. And they still don't, but they were there every time I needed them, they tried their best to make me feel better and in the end, that's all that mattered.”

Harry just nodded. The topic had turned heavy so suddenly and she had revealed so much to him – more than he ever expected her to – that he didn't know how else he could acknowledge her bravery other than by staying silent and listening to everything that she had to get off her chest.

“I may not have been there for you before, but I promise I'll be here any time you need to talk to someone about anything.” He looked into her eyes to make sure she knew he was being utterly serious about this.

“That's a two way street,” was all she said back.

He offered her a smile, one which she returned, and they turned their attention back to their friends, who had gotten into a rather passionate discussion over whether or not mermaids grew their own food in an underwater garden.
Chapter 15

'There's no time! He's here. Get Harry and run!'

'What? Ja-

'Run, Lily! I'll hold him off.'

Frantic feet up the stairs, joggling him up and down within strong, slender arms. Strands of long, ginger hair tickled the back of his head but he paid it no mind. The noise was too loud.

Their serene Saturday evening had been crushed down unexpectedly and now he was being carried up the stairs to his room. He could tell it was his, it smelled like the shampoo that his parents rubbed in his hair when it was bath time and the soft, plastic tint of dispensable diapers.

His mum tripped on one of his toys while entering the room. The momentum brought the crown of his head into painful contact with her chin and he cried out. She shushed him, hugged him close and stepped up behind his bed, swaying back and forth, thin shadow dancing in the moonlight.

CRASH!

'Avada K-

His mother hummed louder and large drops of rain fell on his cheeks. The sounds from downstairs had suddenly stopped. A sweet kiss was placed almost violently on his forehead, he felt like her arms were squeezing the thoughts out of him before they let go and lowered him to his bed.

'I love you, sweetheart.' Her face peered at him through wooden bars. 'You'll be okay, I promise.'

The door was blown in, bits of wood and chips of paint flying everywhere, the perforated walls of his crib couldn't protect him from the blast and some of it landed on his pyjamas, luckily the winged snitches didn't seem to mind.

'Step aside, girl.'

He knew what came next. He had to wake up.

'Please, don't take Harry. Take me instead!'

'I said, step aside!'

'I won't let you take him! I won't! You'll have to go through me first!'

He didn't want to see this. Not again. Wake up!

Laughter.

'We shall have it your way then. Creaking floorboards. 'Av-'"

WAKE UP!

Harry jolted awake, his sleeping shirt sticking to his chest and back, drenched in night sweat and, he suspected, tears. His mouth was open wide and long, pulling in as much air as he could into his failing lungs, his heart beating wings of a hummingbird, fingers shaking as he pushed them through
dark hair, then fumbled on the night-stand for his glasses.

He bit his lip with enough force to draw blood but did not complain as the pain helped in bringing him back to the present, out of his nightmare. Shaking off the burgundy covers, he stepped out of bed and donned his slippers, snatching the tools he would need on his way to the door.

It was as he was walking down the long halls of the castle, invisibility cloak covering him from head to toe, magical map in his pocket and wand in its holster, that his heart began to slow down and the tremors in his body abated. This was not the first time that Harry had woken up from a nightmare, even that particular one, and by now he'd started calling this walking session of his a routine cool down.

Occlumency had helped him with keeping visions of Voldemort at bay but had had one unpleasant side-effect as well. In order to clear his mind every night and lock away precious thoughts and memories behind his mental defences, he'd had to unearth all the memories he had, study them with care to keep them at the forefront of his mind and then use that vivid image in his head to sort it into whatever category it belonged to. Naturally, he'd avoided his most painful memories like the plague and had instead stuffed them inside a drawer in the deepest recesses of the magical labyrinth in his head. It hadn't mattered that Alice had warned him against it, implored him to face his demons, slay them with the metaphorical sword and lay them to rest once and for all; he hadn't heeded her warning.

He could feel his walls straining now, traps failing in the face of an internal invasion, an unaccounted factor, his mind essentially fighting against itself, unsure whether to follow set orders and keep those memories trapped where he'd stashed them or expel them into his consciousness. It turned out that even in a battle of the mind there were casualties involved. The memory of his parents' deaths had been caught up in the fray and been thrown overboard so to speak, starring in his dreams and waking him with a vengeance.

He knew he couldn't continue like this any longer, this would not be the last time his demons broke out to terrorise him in the land of sleep and he could not keep chasing them down and chaining them to the very place they jumped out of.

It was about time he lay his fears to rest and do what he should've done months ago.

Mind set to do the right thing once and for all, he set his mind to enjoying the last few moments of peace he had left before he trudged back upstairs to meditate. Eyes scanning his surroundings, he noticed for the first time that he was on the east side of the castle, large stone windows framing the left side of the hall, not too far away from the main entrance.

His feet had started creeping towards the wooden benches beneath the windows when a shimmer from the corner of his eye caught his fancy. Quickly, he plastered himself against the wall, senses on high alert and carefully scanning the dark hall, taking inventory of minute changes which, to any wizard worth his galleons, would clearly indicate that something magical was amiss.

There! He saw it again.

It was not a shimmer, more like a wave, like those made when a stone fell into water and spurred multiple ripples across the surface. Harry hadn't seen a Disillusionment Charm in action before but he would bet all the jewels in his vault that there was someone wearing sneaking around the castle and using magic to hide it. It could be anyone really, hell, he was strolling down the school wearing an invisibility cloak himself, but he had this feeling in his gut, like a pull, only stronger, that told him that something was not right.
Although he would like to think that he was not the same impulsive boy that followed Quirrel to the magically guarded Philosopher's Stone, Harry still chased after the invisible figure prancing around in front of him, catching a ripple in the air every once in a while, reassuring him that he was on the right trail.

The anonymous stranger led him through the castle doors, past Hagrid's hut and into the Forbidden Forest where the individual was made easier to track through the sound of snapping branches and rustling grass.

As they ventured deeper and deeper into the forest, Harry started to realize that the temperature in the air was rising, he could see further in front of him, a cluster of trees up ahead hid a source of bright, flickering light, perhaps from a bonfire? He couldn't tell, though he also registered faint noises, of growls and grunts mixed with shouts of surprise, maybe anger, could be heard travelling with the breeze.

Now more curious than ever, Harry veered off from following the mystery witch or wizard and searched for a break in the foliage, an opening which he could use to his advantage to see what had been worth sneaking around Hogwarts castle at night, wearing a charm meant to hide your very presence.

“Hold her steady, men! She's feisty one, that one and won't be tamed with flattery, let me tell you!”

An orange burst of light followed this man's shout and brought Harry up short. A roar, one he'd heard before only once in his lifetime, followed the man's yelled warning. Harry didn't have to push any branches aside to know of the impossible sight that would wait for him.

Dragons.

There, a mere twenty, maybe thirty feet in front of him were the very real forms of four large, scaled and furious dragons, enclosed within a single cage of wood planks and metal bars which seemed incapable of holding their mere size and power in check. They were roaring and snorting at the group of men clustered at their feet, too angry for words, yanking back with force on the chains cementing them to the ground – they opened their mouths, flaunted their sharp, fanged teeth, and torrents of fire shot out, smoke billowing up from their round nostrils while their claws swiped in a clear threat at the little wizards straining to keep them under control.

“Don't get too close there, Hagrid!” yelled a man straining with a chain tethering a silvery blue dragon. “They say they can only shoot fire at thirty feet max, but I swear I saw that Horntail reach forty just last week and you're right at the edge of her range!”

Startled, Harry squinted at the other side of the clearing, the place where the unknown wizard was shouting to, and saw the distinct form of Hagrid accompanied by his even more imposing companion, Madame Maxime.

A discussion had broken out among the dragon keepers, brought to an end by an encouraging cry from the one that had shouted the warning at Hagrid. Harry watched mesmerized as ten keepers lifted their wands high in the air, tips pointing at the awesome, ink-black dragon causing the most trouble, and shouted, “Stupefy!” The Stunning Spells shot out of their owners' wands in an explosion of red energy bolts, striking the dragon on its scaled hide and exploding into fireworks of light.

Harry watched the dragon blink its snake-like eyes, teetering dangerously on its feet and swaying from side to side, unsure as to whether it should fall victim to their spell or not, its jaws drawn wide in a silent howl of outrage, smoke still pouring out of its mouth and nose – then, gradually, it started
falling to the ground. The dragon's sinewy hide hit the forest floor with a resounding thud, such force behind the forced contact that Harry could have sworn the trees surrounding him trembled slightly.

The defeat of one of their own must have resonated within the other dragons as they appeared to be behaving more docile now that the keepers had proven their skills. In the almost silence that followed, Harry watched from the shadows as the man who had spoken to Hagrid stepped closer to the smouldering remains of a tree and allowed the brightness from the fire to light up his stocky build, his carrot-red hair and sparkling blue eyes.

Charlie Weasley jogged over to the edge of the dragon enclosure to exchange a few words with the odd couple that had come to watch the spectacle. Figuring that this was as good a time as any, Harry turned his back on the dragons and their keepers, walked a few steps away from the clearing before remembering the reason why he'd just been privy to such a magnificent show. He spotted a man crouching down behind a bush not ten feet away from where Harry had stood under his Invisibility Cloak, the distinct markings of a goatee identifying him as none other than Igor Karkaroff, Head of Durmstrang Institute and the man previously hiding himself with Disillusionment Charm.

That's when all the pieces started falling together for Harry. The dragons, Charlie, Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, Hagrid...

The dragons were the First Task.

Getting back inside Hogwarts castle undetected was a breeze, he could do it with his eyes closed at this point, and he briefly wondered what that had to say about the security for the students but he couldn't dwell too much on that. He had other things on his mind, like how he would have to fight a fire breathing, spike covered, twenty feet tall dragon within two weeks. He wasn't sure whether he was better off now, knowing beforehand, or if he would have preferred it being kept an unwanted surprise until the moment he was plucked from the crowd and dumped at the beast's mercy.

Harry shuddered. Knowing beforehand allowed him to at least prepare himself for the inevitable and maybe even research some spells that could affect dragons without requiring it to be shot several different times by several different wizards...

“Balderdash,” he mumbled to the Fat Lady.

“Whatever you say, dear...” she whispered sleepily, barely stirring as her portrait swung back to grant him passage.

He hesitated only briefly by the fireplace, wanting more than anything in the world to snatch some Floo powder, dump it in the fire and talk to his godfather and Remus about the horrible news he'd just inadvertently received, but ultimately decided against it.

“Too risky,” he whispered to the empty room and headed up to his dormitory. A herd of hippogriffs could've waltzed in the room at that very moment and his room-mates would wake up in the morning none the wiser and he'd be more worried about it if it didn't serve his plans quite so well. Sitting himself cross-legged on the bed, he braced himself for an hour of willingly reliving his worst memories, consoling himself only slightly with the promise of uninterrupted nights in the future.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

“Can you believe what that--that woman,” Hermione spat the term as though it were rotten eggs in her mouth, “had to say about you? She completely made up her entire article! I know you very well Harry so I know for a fact that you would never even think of saying these things to anyone, never mind this...bug-eyed snake from the Daily Prophet.”
Harry nodded in agreement with her but didn't bother to look up from his plate of scrambled eggs. Last night's meditation had left him more exhausted than he would ever admit to anyone and had dredged up old feelings that, in his opinion, could've been left nice and buried in the first place. Add that to the ever so popular badges being passed around like candy which read *POTTER STINKS* and had an extremely crude drawing of him as a stick figure with stink squiggles flying out of his hair, and Harry would gladly give this day the honour of ranking up in his top thirty of worst days ever – a lot of bad things had happened to him for this one to deserve a place higher than thirty.

“Well? Aren't you going to say anything, Harry? After all, this article seems to concern the both of us,” she wrinkled her nose.

“What do you want me to say, Hermione? Don't you think I want to walk into the *Daily Prophet* and show those shameless liars exactly what they deserve? If I make a big fuss about it then I'm giving these morons,” he gestured toward the table of snickering Slytherins, “the exact reaction they want and I'm not willing to do that. This day is bad enough as it is and it's only breakfast.”

Hermione seemed to be mollified that his lack of response wasn't for lack of caring but if the gleam in her eye told Harry anything at all, it was that she was not ready to let this matter rest yet.

“Good morning everyone,” sang Ginny, dropping down next to Hermione. “Why the long faces? It's only Thursday; we have one more day to go and then it's the sweet two days of a–” A newspaper was shoved unceremoniously in her face by Hermione.

Harry watched her eyes flicker back and forth on the paper, cheeks turning redder and redder the further she read. He sighed.

“Who the hell does Skeeter think she is!” Ginny hissed. “Making all that stuff up about you and Harry? That's one thing but adding all that rubbish about him *still crying every night at the death of his beloved parents*,” her voice rose so high she almost squeaked the last word she quoted. “Harry, you cannot allow her to get away with this. This woman is clearly out for blood and I say we give it to her and then some.”

Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Ginny this mad before, not on his behalf, and he'd be lying if he said that it didn't stir certain inappropriate feelings towards his platonic friend.

“That's what I've been trying to tell him!” Hermione exclaimed, ecstatic to be supported in her opinions. She continued as though he wasn't there, “He says that he doesn't want to give them the satisfaction of getting a rise out of him but I think they'll be even happier to see him look powerless and depressed.”

“Hey! I'm neither powerless, nor depressed. In case you haven't noticed, I have a few more important things to worry about than some stupid badges, like finding out a way to beat a full-grown dragon,” Harry snapped.

“A dragon?” Ginny's horrified whisper made Harry want to hex himself in the face for being so callous with such delicate news.

“You must be mistaken, Harry. Surely the school wouldn't allow an underage wizard to battle a *dragon*. Whoever must've told you that just wanted to scare you off,” said Hermione.

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled. “I would think that too if I hadn't seen the beasts with my own two eyes last night.”

So, he told them what had happened the night before, how he had woken up in the middle of the
night and gone for a walk, how he had spotted Headmaster Karkaroff lurking through the castle with a Disillusionment Charm, had followed him to the forest and seen the dragon keepers subduing those wild animals.

“The only other time I've seen dragons was in Gringotts but this was different. These ones – they were different, they were wilder, more aggressive. It's the same difference between a pet dog and a wild dog, they can both be dangerous but you have to keep both eyes open with the wild one, whereas the pet will only harm you if it's to defend itself or someone else. To be honest, I don't know which one I prefer considering we still have no idea what I'll have to do with the dragon.” Harry's shoulders deflated, feeling powerless in a way that he hasn't been since Sirius and Remus took him in.

“We'll figure something out, Harry. At least now you know what you're up against.” Ginny granted him a half-hearted smile which couldn't tamper the fear in her eyes.

“I'll start looking in the library right away,” piped in Hermione. “I'm sure there have to be some curses which will be effective against dragons, even with their strong scales to protect them.”

“And you should let Padfoot and Moony know as well,” urged Ginny. “They ought to have some ideas that could help.”

Throat clogged up with gratitude, Harry could do little more than nod at them. Maybe this day wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Oh, the bloody tosser did it. I can't believe him,” cried Ginny.

Swivelling his head around to look at what Ginny was talking about, Harry's thoughts came to an abrupt halt from shock, only to then restart with a pounding fury as swaggering towards them, chest puffed out like he had nothing to be ashamed of, was none other than Ronald Weasley – proudly showing off his new accessory pinned to the front of his cloak.

POTTER STINKS

The two words flashed up on his badge, a beacon demanding the attention of everyone in the Great Hall, only to then swirl out of existence in a mesh of colour to be replaced with:

SUPPORTCEDRIC DIGGORY: THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION

From the corner of his eye, Harry could see Hermione burying her face in her hands and shaking her head in disappointment, but he could barely register her reaction over the sound of rushing blood in his ears and the haze of red spreading from the edge of his eyes. His hands tightened into fists, his lips pressed together tightly to prevent him from saying anything, though the truth could be gleaned from the tight set of his shoulders and the straightness of his back.

Ron sauntered past their seats, flanked by Dean and Seamus, seemingly failing to spare them so much as a glance, but Harry knew from the slight hesitance as he took his next step that Ron had spotted Harry amongst the crowd of students.

Ginny made an effort to stand and confront her dim-witted brother but was halted by Hermione's hand gripping her sleeve. A look that Harry did not understand the meaning of, but could guess at, was exchanged between the two girls before Ginny landed back in her seat with an angry huff, Hermione shrinking in on herself like a wilted flower as she stared after Ron's retreating back.

The end of breakfast could not come fast enough in Harry's opinion and he bolted out of the Great Hall as soon as the bell rang. Classes that day offered him nothing in terms of distraction from his
foul mood, not even Hagrid's parade of increasingly dangerous magical creatures could break through the grey cloud hovering over his head.

Dinner came and went, he thought he might have talked to Neville about moving next week's defence tutoring session to another day but he couldn't be sure, his mind had been already skipping ahead to what he would say to Remus and Sirius when he talked to them that night and nobody questioned his premature departure from the Great Hall.

“Hello Hedwig. Have you missed me?” The owl's soft cooing brought out his first genuine smile of the day. “Yeah, I missed you too.”

He spent a few moments reacquainting himself with his trusty companion, affectionately scratching her head, carding his fingers through her sleek feathers and murmuring quietly to the night, expelling faint clouds of warm air with every story he shared with her.

It was with great reluctance that he left his post at the owl's side, moving to sit at the foot of a nearby pillar with only a mild dose of hot air conjured by his wand to keep his limbs from freezing to his sides. He produced his two-way mirror out of his cloak and spoke aloud Sirius' name to activate the magical call. Harry had been touched to receive his father's mirror from Sirius but had forgotten he'd brought it with him to school the last time he'd fire-called his godfather from the Common Room.

“Harry! It's good to hear from you, pup!” Under different circumstances, Sirius' bright greeting would have coaxed a similar one from Harry.

“Hey Sirius, is Remus around? I have something to tell you that I think you'll want to know – it's about the First Task.” He didn't want to waste any time beating around the bush and figured a straightforward approach would be his best bet with the two men.

“He's right here,” the mirror was shifted to the side and the left half of Remus' face came into the frame. “What's going on, Harry? This doesn't feel like a regular call back home.”

“It's not.” Harry stated bluntly. “I saw something that I wasn't supposed to know about last night. I was walking around Hogwarts at night when I saw someone hiding underneath a Disillusionment Charm poking around the school, so I followed him-”

“Naturally,” Remus scoffed.

“-and he led me to a clearing somewhere in the middle of the forest. I only realized that the man was Karkaroff a while after because I was distracted by the bloody dragons they've been keeping in the woods like cattle!” A little bit of the hysteria Harry had been keeping inside since the night before came out.

“Dragons? That's what the First Task is going to be?” Sirius' complexion has turned waxy and he seemed to be on the verge of throwing up.

“Yes. Madame Maxime and Hagrid were there, and so was Charlie Weasley, but it was Karkaroff sneaking out to the forest that really helped me put the dots together.” He swallowed and whispered, “I can't fight a dragon; I don't stand a chance. They needed about twenty wizards to put one of those animals sleep and you think I'll be able to do the same thing alone? I just don't know what to do.”

Harry hated feeling this weak and helpless, but what he hated even more was going to others and asking for help when he felt that he should be able to do this on his own – but God knows, he could really use some advice right now. Preferably before the gravity of his situation hit him once more.

“Alright Harry, here is what you're going to do. You're going to calm down, first of all,” Harry was
very tempted to tell a bedraggled looking Remus that perhaps he should take his own advice as well, “and then you’re going to tell us everything you remember about the dragons you saw. Anything can help. We’ll identify these animals first and then we’ll start looking at ways to deal with them, alright?”

Harry nodded as he absorbed every word Remus said like a plant would store sunlight. He hadn’t known how much comfort it would bring him to have Remus and Sirius’ support but now that he had it, he was triple as glad that he had called them as soon as he had had it.

“We'll scour the books in the Black library and send you the information of any spell, potion or curse that we can find,” said Sirius. “With the number of books my family collected over the centuries, Dark magic or not, there is bound to be something here that will help you in the Tournament – I just know it, Harry.”

“Right,” Harry mumbled.

“What's wrong, Harry?” Remus seemed to have shifted the mirror closer to him and now his entire face was visible. “I know this isn’t exactly... an ideal situation but you’ve been in worse situations before and have always found a way to pull through when least expected. I think it's the Marauder in you,” he said, smiling in a melancholic manner.

“I just- I have a bad feeling about this, about all of this. I haven't had a dream of Voldemort since the first one during this summer and I don't know if that's good or not, even if we have no clue why I'm having them in the first place,” Harry confessed. “And now someone mysteriously dropped my name in the Goblet and suddenly I'm one of the champions in the most dangerous tournament of wizard-kind? I may be slow on the take with some things but I'm not stupid. This cannot end well – not with my luck.” He shut his eyes as he recalled the incidents of the past three years in Hogwarts. Heck, why not even go back further through his entire childhood to the moment where it all began for him – the night his parents were murdered because of a prophecy told by a shandy-drinking fraud and overheard by a power-hungry egomaniac.

“You're right,” Sirius said. “The chances of this being anything other than a personal attack on you are non-existent and we have no idea how it will play out in the end.” Harry slumped further against the wall as his godfather confirmed what he already knew. “But this isn't then end, Harry – this is only the beginning which means that the end hasn't been decided yet. Just because you’ve been thrust into this does not mean that you have no choices left, that you can’t alter the outcome in some way.

“You are not powerless and you are not weak. You know more now than you ever did before, you have your friends to support you and you have us to help you,” Remus nodded in agreement through the mirror. “You’ve never given up before, Harry – and I know you won't start now. It's not in your blood to surrender, pup. You fight, and you fight good until you win, do you understand?”

Harry had his jaw locked tightly in place as his emerald eyes gazed at his godfather whilst the man’s words resonated deep within him. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“I understand.”

“Good.” Sirius suddenly grinned, a mischievous tilt to his lips that Harry had so far only seen in old photographs. “Let’s get you ready to battle a dragon, eh?”

The morning of the First Task dawned bright and early on a Wednesday. The school had been bubbling with excitement the entire week and it seemed that today would be the day that that particular cauldron would finally overflow and trickle down to the Quidditch pitch, which now acted
as a stadium for the spectators of the Tournament.

Poking at his food with a fork, Harry ignored Hermione's attempts to get him to eat something and instead stared blankly at the cooling eggs on his plate. He had yet to say a word to anyone since he woke up that morning, his feet blocks of concrete weighing him down as her stumbled down the halls of Hogwarts to the Great Hall. Neville – bless his kind soul – hadn't attempted to comfort him in any way as he followed behind his friend, keeping an eye on the catatonic teenager who looked as though he were heading to his own witch-burning.

“Harry, please, you have got to eat something if you want your magic to be strong for the task,” Hermione begged him. She replaced his plate of food with a new one and nudged it closer to him, mimicking the act of eating as though she were convincing a toddler to eat his vegetables.

“I'm not hungry,” Harry muttered, his voice nearly drowned out by the twittering of student whispers as they traded theories back and forth on the possible outcomes of the Tournament. Even though he'd tried to remain unaffected as he'd walked down to breakfast, he hadn't been able to tune out the students around him – whether they were wishing him well on the Task or jeering 'Hope you've got your affairs in order, Potter' when they passed by him.

Hermione had pursed her lips together in a manner reminiscent of Professor McGonagall while her eyes shot tiny darts of fire through his head. Spotting Ginny approaching from behind him, Hermione beckoned her to sit next to the panicking young man and said, “Ginny, don't you think Harry should be eating something – anything – before the Task? I don't think it will do him any good to face a dragon on an empty stomach.”

Harry made a face at his best friend and made it a point to slide the plate further away from him as he mumbled a good morning to Ginny.

“I know you don't want to hear this, but Hermione's right, Harry.” She sat down next to him, bumping his shoulder with her own. “Maybe don't eat the eggs, but at least have some toast before you have to go. Mum always says that you can't start your day on an empty stomach and I think that applies ten times more on a day like this.”

Ginny had already assembled him a simple plate of toast with butter by the time she finished talking. She spared him a glance which told him he better eat something before she went full Weasley on him, and then turned back to her own meal.

Witnessing the exchange between the two, Hermione didn't dare to tease her friend as he reluctantly started biting off pieces of toasted bread and swallowing them down with a warm helping of tea. She was happy that Harry was finally eating something but, as she sneaked a look further down the table to a certain ginger-haired block-head, she couldn't help but feel a tiny bit jealous witnessing the obviously blossoming connection between Harry and Ginny.

For the next few minutes, the trio continued to eat in peace, the only break in their tranquillity when they politely greeted Neville as he shyly sat down next to them and joined them in breakfast.

“Potter!” Professor McGonagall strode purposefully over to her student, “If you would please finish your breakfast and follow me. The Champions are being called to the grounds now... You have to get ready for the First Task.”

His tea sloshed onto the table as he dropped the cup, “Alright.” Harry felt a hand grab his and squeeze in reassurance, punctuated by the exclamations of encouragement from his three friends as he followed Professor McGonagall out the Great Hall and onto the school grounds.
Peeking over at his walking companion, Harry observed that she didn't seem quite herself today either. Her normally stiff and immaculate posture was tainted by two hands wringing a white handkerchief and thin tendrils of hair escaping from the bun held tightly against her skull. They exchanged a few words, in which she offered him shaky reassurances, before she pushed him through the flaps of a newly erected tent built on the edge of – what had been – the Quidditch pitch.

He did not bother to exchange pleasantries with the other Champions, only an acknowledging nod being shared between himself and Cedric to show he had received his message.

“It's not exactly fair, is it? Every champion except Cedric will know what's happening in the First Task,” Hermione had commented a few days after the revelation of the dragons.

“Don't worry,” he'd told her, “I already took care of it. I sent him a message yesterday when I realized the same thing. Hopefully he'll believe me but it's up to him to decide that.”

Harry wasn't sure whether Cedric had believed his claims or not, but at least he'd been warned with enough time to prepare something.

In no time at all, Harry starting hearing hundreds of pairs of feet pass by the tent amongst the laughing and joking voices of their owners. Harry had reverted back to the same disconnected state that he'd been in before breakfast and could see from the frantic pacing of Cedric, the nervous hair play of Fleur's and Krum's eyes staring off into blank space that they had each adopted their own coping mechanisms to make it through the terrifying wait.

“Alright champions!” Ludo Bagman popped his head in the tent, followed by the rest of his body. “I hope you're all as excited as I am so what do you say and we get this moving, eh? The crowd has assembled outside and now it's time for me to tell you the objective of this first task – to secure the golden egg.” He paused for dramatic effect then produced a purple silk bag from his coat and shook the contents in their faces. “Each of you will pick out your...”

Harry drowned out the rest of his words and just watched as each champion took their turn picking out their miniaturized dragon models from the depths of the bag. He took in their expressions as they held the small beasts and could see from Fleur's strong set of her shoulders and Krum's impassive gaze that his suspicions had been correct – they'd been told beforehand. Cedric, on the other hand, had turned an ugly shade of green and had briefly closed his eyes – in prayer or disbelief, Harry wasn't sure.

Cedric was the first to go. Fleur followed after him, and then Krum. Harry attempted to ignore the cheers of the crowd that made their way to him through the thin flaps of the tent and the animal roars which were followed by a collective wince as the crowd sympathized with the champion.

“NEXT UP, FOLKS, IS HARRY POTTER!”

He felt the crowd go ballistic as he trudged up the path to the arena, his breath hitching in his throat as the first sight that greeted him was the Hungarian Horntail tethered to a mountain of rocks, the chain encircling its neck glowing briefly with magic as the dragon strained against it.

No sooner had he stepped foot on the field that the dragon stiffened and snapped its neck in his direction, eyes narrowing with angry suspicion, taking in the sight of the small human making its way towards her. She immediately dropped down on her hunches, tail poised behind her, ready to strike within a moment's notice if the young wizard so much as breathed wrong.

Harry took out his wand and said, “Accio Firebolt!”
Nothing happened.

“Why don’t you just do what Moody said and summon your Firebolt?” Neville had asked him a week ago.

“I'll try to do that, don't get me wrong, but if I were inviting dragons into my school event, I'd make damn well sure that they won't be able to fly away. I'd put up wards.” He'd replied.

“You need a plan B in case that doesn't work and you're stuck with jack-shit up your sleeve,” Ginny had said.

“Ginny!” Hermione had reprimanded her.

Harry had chuckled, “She's not wrong, but maybe make it plan B-Z, just to be safe.”

And she still wasn't wrong, he thought, sensing the magical pulses surrounding the area reach out to him as the spell he'd cast was made useless. Cursing loudly, the jeers of the crowd went unnoticed as he dove to the side, narrowly escaping a column of blue fire.

“So, plan B,” he muttered to himself.

The dragon had reared up on her hind-legs, head held up regally as she surely imagined several different ways to put an end to his short and troubled existence.

“I mean you no harm,” he really tried to sound reassuring to the dragon but he wasn't sure how much of that warm fuzziness was being conveyed when he was reduced to speaking in hisses. “I just want the golden egg – the one placed there by the wizards, not yours.”

A pin could have dropped right then and there and everyone in the stadium would have been able to hear it with how quiet the crowd had suddenly gotten. Some of them were, no doubt, remembering the last wizard that that had been able to speak the language of the snakes...

The dragon had frozen upon hearing him speak parseltongue and, if possible, started watching him even more warily than she had been before. “You have no business with my eggs, human. I will kill you where you stand.” Not up for any more chit chat, the dragon let out an almighty roar, smoke billowing out from her nose and mouth opening wide to allow a jet of fire to shoot out of her, aimed directly at Harry.

He jumped out of the way, the screams of the crowd following him as he sprinted off to a large boulder, ducking behind it just in time to avoid getting burned to a crisp. Heart pounding in his throat, he wasted no more time and gripped his wand tight, aiming it at his head as he declared, “Geminio me!”

To the spectators, Harry's form seemed to blur momentarily, his outline indiscernible underneath the glow of the yellow glow of the spell. When the spell died down, where there had been one Harry crouching behind the large rock, there were now five.

The crowd tittered excitedly amongst each other, fingers pointing and mouths running a mile a minute as they forgot their earlier unease and became absorbed in the spectacle.

Harry didn't need to tell his copies what to do, they understood him perfectly and followed his plan flawlessly. The fake Harrys shot out from their hiding spot and made a spectacle of themselves, distracting her attention long enough for the real Harry to pop his head out while she was swiping at his copies, take careful aim at her head and shout, “Ebullio!”
Harry did not wait to see the spell take effect, he had practised it enough times to know it would, so he ran recklessly towards a familiar glint situated behind the dragon – one similar to that of the gold from the snitch when Harry chased it around this very field.

He was forced to duck many times, avoiding the Horntail's flailing limbs as she became more infuriated than she had been before, the Bubble-Head charm that he'd cast on her preventing any fire from exiting her mouth. Her fury sure was a sight to behold, for she didn't hesitate in the least at doling out her revenge, dropping down on four legs with cat-like grace and using her wings to swipe away the fake Harrys like flies, whining in satisfaction when she felt the collision of scales on human flesh. She was circling on one of the Harrys, pinning him against the wall with no chance of escape, paying no mind to the cries coming from above.

Spotting his chance, with the Horntail distracted, Harry dove at the cluster of eggs. He snatched up the golden egg with an exultant cry which could not have come at a worst timing, for the Horntail had chosen that exact moment to claw at the fake Harry, only to watch in confusion as the wizard popped out of existence before her yellow eyes, leaving her with no means of distraction as she twisted her neck in the direction of the cry.

“Harry Potter has got the egg!” Bagman yelled and the crowd cheered and booed with him.

The Horntail yowled in anger.

Harry barely glimpsed the spiked tail coming towards him, catching him on the back and down his right flank, forcing a scream of pain out of him as he was thrown back against the wall.

Immediately, a group of dragon keepers swarmed the arena, shooting spells at the dragon and tugging on her chain in their efforts to subdue her.

“Potter!” Professor McGonagall approached him with Hagrid in tow. “We must get you to Madam Pomfrey at once. Are you able to walk? Otherwise Hagrid could-”

“N-no, Professor,” Harry stammered out through the burning pain flaring at his side, “I c-can walk, thank you.”

“Yeh did it, 'Arry,” Hagrid cleared his throat. “Yeh really did it! I can't tell yeh how scared we were, watchin' you from up there as the Horntail faced you... Gotta tell ya, that is one beautiful creature, that one... makes me wonder how Norbert's doin' without his mama... But enough abou' that, Charlie Weasley's really impressed with you, lad – we all are.” Hagrid abruptly looked away from him and brought his arm up to wipe his watering eyes on his sleeve.

Embarrassed beyond measure, Harry chose to remain quiet and only gave the slightest nod in return, grateful that Madam Pomfrey's fretting allowed him the perfect excuse to remain still and quiet.

“Dragons, I tell you! I don't know what Professor Dumbledore or the Ministry is thinking, pitting students against those beasts,” she finished rubbing some purple ointment on the gash at his side. “Now, this one might scar, Potter. I hope you don't mind but you can never tell with these creatures.” She muttered something under her breath and bandages sprung from the end of her wand, wrapping themselves expertly around his torso.

“That should do it for now,” she nodded to herself. “Stay here and don't move. I must go check on Diggory next door,” and with that, she bustled off through one of the flaps of this improvised infirmary.

The residual effects of such high levels of adrenaline in his system made him feel all jittery and
nervous, desiring nothing more than to stand up and walk off the uncomfortable sensation. Before he could contemplate such actions, a blur of people came rushing in from another entrance – Ginny and Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

“Harry! Are you alright?” Ginny was the first one in and rushed instantly to his side. “They wouldn't let us come and see you until now and we thought…” She grabbed his hand in the two of her own and squeezed.

“Oh, we thought the worst had happened,” Hermione moaned in distress, standing at the foot of the bed with small, half-moon shaped marks dotting her cheeks.

“I'm fine.” At their sceptic looks, he quickly followed it with, “The Horntail managed to catch me on the side but Madam Pomfrey managed to patch me up all good.” He didn't think telling them that he could have a permanent scar from this incident would be such a good idea at the moment.

“Harry,” Ron spoke for the first time since arriving, face white as a sheet and tone entirely serious. “Mate, I don't know how your name got put in the Goblet, but I reckon whoever did it was trying to get rid of you!”

“You don't say, Ron. Why – I'd never even thought of that before you mentioned it. Where was your superior wisdom all this time as I was preparing myself to fight a bloody dragon!”

Hermione stepped away from her two best friends as they faced each other for the first time in weeks, noting the hurt hiding underneath Harry's anger and the shame on Ron's red face.

“Harry, I-I'm sorry, mate... I don't know what to say…” Ron tried desperately to hold Harry's gaze, but the storm brewing behind the other's eyes forced him to glance away.

“It's okay,” Harry said. “I forgive you this time.”

“What? No, Harry, I know I-”

“I forgive you this time,” Harry interrupted Ron, “Because next time it won't be this easy for you, and I'd like you to remember this moment. I'm forgiving you, but I'm not forgetting.”

Ron gulped. “Alright mate... So, we good?” He smiled tentatively.

Harry grinned back, “Yeah, we're good.”

A snifflle caught their attention and they turned as one, catching the tears falling down Hermione's face. “I can't believe you two!” She squeaked. “After everything you put me through now it's all suddenly gone with two words?” She broke down to sobs and Ginny rushed to her side, comforting the older girl as best as she could.

“She's barmy, I tell you,” Ron whispered. “Come on Harry, let’s leave these two to it and go see what you scored.”
“—and Krum, he ran around a bit, shooting spells at the dragon's eyes...and it worked well after all, I guess, but he did lose points when some of his eggs got smashed. The dragon keepers were not happy about that, and neither were the judges, since the only one to give him higher than a 7 was Karkaroff and even that changed after...” Ron's voice droned on and on, regaling Harry with every minute detail of the first task.

He was a fly cruising around Harry's head, sometimes feeling brave and venturing close enough to his ear that he could almost imagine identifying the slap of its wings against the air currents, the different words that he uttered merging into complete sentences, and then moving far away where it once again became a distant buzz in the background.

They were walking through the castle to the Gryffindor common room, the first task having officially concluded half an hour ago with Harry surprisingly coming out on top with the highest score for the round. He'd been told to keep the golden egg and then had it briefly explained to him that it would give him a clue for the next task if he was able to solve it in time.

He'd worry about it later, perhaps when he did not feel as though a herd of hippogriffs had used him as their runway to take flight. His right side flared with agony at every step he took, making it so that he had to lean slightly to his right to keep the damaged skin from stretching and reopening the wound.

“—a dog! Can you believe it, Harry!” Ron's eyes shone with the ingenuity of it.

“No, couldn't picture it.” His curt reply didn't seem to bother the ginger-haired boy as he continued speaking, his voice carrying down the hall and to the portraits lounging on the walls.

Ginny, Hermione and Neville had left ahead of them, supposedly wanting to get ahead of the herd of students that would stampede down the halls as soon as the task was over. But Harry knew better – or rather, he knew the twins and his fellow Gryffindors well enough to envision the party waiting for him beyond the Fat Lady's portrait.

Now that the task was over and the excess adrenaline had been mostly burned from his system, Harry found that he could barely focus beyond dropping one foot in front of the other, and even that small feat was taking considerable effort on his part. Physically, he'd been drained, sucked dry, his insides scooped out with a spoon and the remaining meat suit filled with sand. Emotionally, he was numb, he couldn't feel anything or maybe he was feeling so much that he couldn't identify each individual sensation.

He was just tired.

Ever since their supposed reunion, Ron had not halted in his efforts to pretend that nothing had ever happened in the first place. His constant chatter and nonsensical friendly gestures were the sewing strings holding together their frayed quilt of a friendship. He'd masterfully placed his stitches exactly where the fabric had stretched and given way to rips and holes, but what he failed to understand was that it was impossible to repair something and pass it as new once it was already broken. It could look *like* new, but it would never truly be the same.

“—were all thinking that you'd gone bonkers, mate. Running at that thing just when you were so close to winning? But then, obviously, I realised what you were on about and—”
“Harry!” The raven haired youth had never been as grateful for Ginevra Weasley as he was at that moment.

She’d swung open the portrait entrance just as they were about to reach it and had jumped down to their level with the ease of a wild gazelle. He would later find it curious how it took just a perfunctory contact of their eyes for her to understand his predicament in a way that Ron, one of his oldest and - until recently - dearest friends, was unable to grasp in the long trek to their common room.

“I have to warn you, Fred and George held nothing back in celebrating Gryffindor’s most valued champion in decades,” her smile was feeble at best and apologetic at most. “Looks like Zonko’s and Butterbeer went off in there and released their offspring in the common room… You’ll hardly recognise it once you’re in there – if you get past all the people to see any of it, that is,” she grimaced.

Harry took a deep breath in and immediately regretted the action when it pulled at the blotted skin over his sore ribs. His exhale came out in a barely audible hiss of pained air.

“Let’s go in and get it over with then. Got to give the people what they want, right?”

“That's the spirit, Harry! Let's go!” Ron clapped him on the back, oblivious to the fragile state of his body, and pushed past him into the Gryffindor tower.

“He’s a prat,” said Ginny, “but he's right, you can't stay hiding out here…be best to just get it over with.” She offered him an unapologetic shrug and nodded to the portrait.

“And maybe it won't be so bad, right?” He added for her.

She snorted in a very unladylike manner.

“Oh it's bad alright, you don't know the half of it.”

She positioned herself ahead of him to be the first to enter, taking on the disappointed cheers and wolf-whistles for herself before he had a chance to be seen, but as soon as he stepped up to the mark, they were on him like a swarm of bees on dripping honey. A maelstrom of snatching hands, pointy elbows and smirking faces immediately pulled him in, grabbing a hold of his clothes and doling out pats on his back without noticing his winces as their eager efforts to congratulate him hit too close to his fresh wounds.

The Gryffindor common room was unrecognisable. The tapestries had been removed, or maybe magically altered, and now instead of depicting the great feats of generations of brave Gryffindors, it showed various scenes from Harry's first task: him, ducking behind a boulder, sticking his head out the side only to barely miss a column of flames, or him again, running towards the dragon, right by her legs, and not escaping in time to avoid her flailing tail.

Suspended in mid-air and floating close to the ceiling, dozens of crystals converged above the students' heads, catching the coloured beams emitted from a boiling cauldron placed in the middle of the room on a raised platform. Functioning much like those disco balls that Harry had seen on TV, these crystals traded the different lights back and forth between each other and lit up the entire room with colour.

“Well don’t just stand there admiring our genius work,” said Fred as he hooked an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled him toward a several tables with snack and drinks. “Take a load off, mate. Grab something to eat and join the party!” His boisterous laugh was met with cheers from the gathered crowd.
“Listen, Fred, I really appreciate all this bu—”

Another arm wrapped itself around his shoulders and cut off his words.

“No need to thank us, Harry. Just sit back, relax, enjoy yourself and we’ll have done our jobs right.” George smiled at him and pushed a cup with a curiously coloured drink into his hand before him and his brother made themselves scarce, dissolving into a group of sixth year Gryffindors.

“I wouldn’t drink that if I were you,” her breath tickled his ear as she leaned up to whisper to him.

“Oh yeah, why not?” He turned around to face Ginny just in time for a poof of orange coloured smoke to erupt from the corner of the room amidst many groans and laughs. Squawking followed.

“That’s why,” she jutted out her chin, gesturing at a second year student that had just been turned into a squawking, eagle-faced kangaroo of all things.

Harry carefully set his cup down on the table.

“Thanks for the warning,” he said.

“Anytime, Harry. So how—”

“Harry! Harry!”

A group of girls, some of which he recognized from his own year and others which he had no clue who they were, were prancing over to him, the excited smiles on their faces completely contrasting the predatory gleam in some of the older girl's eyes.

“Oh Merlin, Harry. I just cannot even imagine how you managed to face that dragon all on your own. You must have been so scared!” One of them said.

“But you were so brave too! If I didn't know any better I could've sworn that you've done this before. You were even braver than those dragon keepers with all their protective armour and spells!” Gushed another one.

“If it had been me out there,” continued a third girl who looked to be slightly older than the rest, and definitely older than him, “I don't know what I would have done. You handled yourself so well. It was really...quite something to watch you in action.”

Ginny felt herself bristling from behind Harry as she listened to all those girls fawn over the same boy that they had made fun of and shunned not four hours ago. She shook her head at their audacity and turned her attention to the boy in question, watching in bemusement – and a small amount of frustration – as Harry Potter was rendered a stuttering fool when faced with a gaggle of teen girls vying for his affections.

“Harry?” She rested her hand on his arm. “You look tired. Maybe you should go ahead and rest. Do you need help getting up to your room?” She tightened her grip on his sleeve when the girls surrounding him practically surged forward at the idea of getting to take to his room.

“Uhm—yeah. Yeah, that would be great. Thanks, Gin,” he swallowed. “Sorry girls but I have to go now, I really am tired. See you...” He thought better of it and decided not to finish that sentence, afraid they would see fit to keep him to his word.

With Ginny walking ahead of him and paving a path through the common room, Harry had his foot on the stairs leading up to the dormitories in no time and had almost made himself believe that he had
made it scot-free. Almost.

“Hiya Harry! Where ya goin’? Aren't you gonna show us what's in that egg of yours?” Lee's question was met with cheers and a chorus of 'Go on, Harry' and 'Yeah, show us'.

Stealing one last longing gaze at the staircase leading up, Harry figured they'd lose interest in him after seeing the inside of the egg and might finally let him get some much needed rest. He manoeuvred the egg out from underneath his arm and brought it up to his face, studying the golden structure carefully.

A decisive twist of his fingers and the egg cracked open down the middle.

The inside of the egg was hollowed out and empty – but the second Harry had pried open the egg, a most horrific noise came screeching out. It was nails on a chalkboard and sand stuck in your throat. It was the sound of something horrid – the only thing Harry could liken it to was the orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party during his first year.

“Turn it off!” Screamed someone, maybe Hermione.

People were covering their ears with their hands and, in some instances, like Neville's case, even grabbing nearby objects like custard cream-puffs in order to muffle the sound.

“What the hell was that!” Dean asked, staring raptly at the egg as Harry slammed it shut. “It sounded like a banshee... or maybe a deranged mermaid. Hey! Maybe you'll have to get past one of those next time?”

“It was someone screaming. Being tortured. I'm sure of it.” Neville had turned pale as a ghost and paid no mind to the dollop a cream hanging off his left ear.

Harry swallowed and tried not to pity his friend too much for having arrived at that particular conclusion considering the Longbottoms' history, which he should have known nothing about in the first place.

“Try not to be a prat, Neville. They're not going to use the Crucius Curse on Harry – or anyone else for that matter - it's illegal.” George reasoned.

“Well I, for one, know exactly what that sounded like, though I didn't know Percy had finally allowed someone to record him singing in the shower. Maybe that's what you'll have to do next: teach him to sing.” Fred grinned.

“If that's the case, then he might as well give up now, brother.” George said.

“Too true... Chocolate pudding, anyone?”

In no time at all the party was back in full swing in the Gryffindor common room – flashes of light and puffs of coloured smoke from here and there speaking of good advertisement for Fred and George's business endeavour.

Harry discreetly passed Ginny the golden egg and followed her up to his room. He closed the door with his foot, shutting out much of the chatter and music from downstairs, and turned to face Ginny.

They stared at each other for a bit. The intimacy of their situation seemed to catch up with both of them at the same time as they blushed and looked away.

“You did really well out there today, you know,” she said softly. “I don't know how you did it—”
“I wouldn't have been able to do anything without everyone's help,” he said. “I don't even want to imagine what would have happened if I'd gone out there with no plan at all,” he huffed out a laugh.

“You would've figured something out – you always do. After all, you're very good at being the hero.”

“Yeah, well...” He didn't know what to say to that comment. All he could tell her is that he hadn't felt much like hero material as he'd stood, staring down a magical beast fifty times his size and he told her as much.

“Being a hero doesn't mean you have no fear, Harry. It just means you're willing to work past it and do what has to be done – and that's what you do.” Her tone had gotten increasingly serious as their conversation had progressed and Harry could sense she was working herself up to say something. “I never thanked you properly for what you did for me... when you saved me.”

Harry straightened himself up. “You know I don't need you to thank me for anything, Gin.” He refrained from saying that there was nothing to thank him for because he knew exactly what he'd done in saving her life two years ago but he didn't want her thinking she owed him something because of it. That wasn't what he wanted at all.

“No, but I do. So thank you, Harry – for saving my life that day,” she was worrying at her bottom lip as she poured out all the gratitude she could into those few words, knowing that saying anything more would have him feeling uncomfortable.

“You're welcome.” It almost pained him to say those words to her, as though he were entertaining the notion that he'd ever even considered not going down into the chamber to save her life.

“I should leave you to rest,” she said, settling down the golden egg on his night-stand and wringing her hands nervously once she had nothing to hold onto.

He wanted to tell her that she could stay, that they could just sit down and talk for a while but the potion Madam Pomfrey had given him seemed to be gradually wearing. He could distinctly feel each and every laceration on his body and he'd be lying if he said that he didn't want to clear his mind and sleep the pain away.

Harry stood rooted to his spot as she walked up to the door, shuffling his feet slightly when she passed. She hesitated by the door.

“Goodnight Harry.” She swayed on her feet, indecisive, then darted up on her toes, brushing a kiss on his cheek which barely skittered past his lips. A swish of red, the slamming of the door and she was gone.

He touched his cheek.

“Night Gin.”

Three days later, ordinary Hogwarts life was back in swing for Harry. He'd recovered quickly with the help of Madam Pomfrey – only a few leftover scars to show of his battle with the Horntail. He, Ron and Hermione were in Herbology class studying the uses of nighlock in various magical poisons when an house-elf popped into existence underneath their high table.

“Mr Potter,” the elf hissed, tugging on Harry's pant leg and almost causing him to topple sideways off his chair, the metals legs squeaking against the floor as they were forcibly moved.
“Mr Potter, is there anything you would like to share with the class?” Professor Sprout pursed her lips at him, hands holding the deadly plant, in the middle of a demonstration.

“No, Professor, I’m sorry. I dropped my quill and slipped a bit when I went to get it.” He looked her straight in the eyes.

“Very well. As I was saying, the roots of the nightlock…”

“Mr Potter.” This time, the elf spoke loud enough to grab Ron and Hermione’s attention – their eyes locked on the elf quizzically as he kept pulling on Harry’s clothes insistently. “I am to give you this before supper today.”

He handed Harry a cream coloured envelope with his name written in loopy cursive on the front. The elf disappeared before Harry could thank him and left him and his friends with a multitude of questions left to ask. Propping open his book in front of him, Harry used it as a cover as he broke the Hogwarts seal and took out a note.

_Dear Harry,_

_Congratulations on your performance during the first task last week. I had the highest confidence that you would do well once you set your mind to the Tournament and you have not let me down._

_In regards to the golden egg you procured and the special circumstances of your election as champion, I believe that I may be of assistance to you._

_If you are available, come to my office this afternoon after your classes end and before dinner is served. I look forward to seeing you soon._

_Professor Dumbledore_

_PS: I enjoy the occasional sugar-wand._

He tucked the piece of parchment back inside its envelope and veered off his friends' inquisitive looks, letting them know with a gesture of his hand that he’d tell them later.

It was after class, as they were all walking together to their next subject, that he got the chance to explain to them what the letter had been about. And by whom it had been sent.

“I think it’s a good thing that Professor Dumbledore is willing to offer you some help for the next task by showing some leniency with the whole ‘no helping champions’ rule,” stated Hermione.

“You’re always on and on about following the rules and whatnot and now you’re saying that you’re happy our Headmaster, of all people, is breaking them?” Ron laughed.

“This is a different situation, Ron,” Hermione insisted. “It doesn’t matter what Harry went through in the Chamber of Secrets when all the other champions have two to three years of magical knowledge over him.”

“He managed to beat their scores just fine in the first task.”

“Yes, and he was also the only one that got badly injured by his dragon,” said Hermione.

“Wow Hermione, please, don't lay it on too thick with the moral support,” Harry retorted.

“Oh Harry, you know that's not how I meant it. I just think that it would be stupid not to let Dumbledore, one of the greatest wizards of our age, give you some piece of advice that could end up
very well saving your life.” Hermione refused to rise to the bait of his snarky remark when she knew that, in this case, she was right.

“I know, Hermione. Just because I don't exactly think too highly of the man right now doesn't mean that I don't recognize an olive branch when I see it.” *Or an excuse to get something out of me about where I'm living instead of under his thumb, at Privet Drive,* Harry thought. “I'm meeting with him soon anyway so we'll see what he has to say.”

“Wanna go outside and play some Quidditch afterwards, mate? I've been dying to get back in the air for a while now,” Ron asked.

Harry hesitated. His friendship with Ron had yet to find still waters and he didn't know whether accepting or rejecting his offer would rock the boat the wrong way round. Things had been normal between them, just like how it had been before their argument when the cup spewed out his name for the Tournament and Harry honestly did not know how to feel about it. He wouldn't deny that it was a relief not to have the animosity hanging between them weighing him down anymore, but he wasn't sure how long this 'brushing it aside' act of theirs would last before one of them finally broke the awkward tension.

“Sure, Ron. Why don't we ask Neville and Ginny if they want to join us too? It'd be more fun with more people around.” 'And maybe less awkward too.'

“Ginny and Neville?” Ron looked at him quizzically. “Neither of them fly so I doubt they'd wanna play Quidditch.”

Harry refrained from telling him his sister could probably outfly the both of them if she set her mind to it.

“You could always teach them to play, Ronald,” said Hermione. “They don't need to know how to fly circles around you if they want to play Quidditch, it's not that difficult of a sport.”

“Not that difficult of a sport!” Ron sputtered.

Already seeing the direction this discussion would take them in, Harry was quick to butt in before they got started dressing each other down in the hallway.

“It was just a suggestion, we can go just us two and we'd still find a lot to do. I think all this time off the pitch has left me a bit rusty. I haven't been on a broom since... last year, I think.”

“Don't worry Harry, we'll have ourselves back in the game in no time,” Ron grinned at him and began talking excitedly about some of the moves he'd read about in Quality Quidditch that he wanted to try out for himself, his irritation with Hermione exiting his mind entirely for the time being.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

From his perch on the rocking chair right in front of the floor to ceiling window, Professor Dumbledore could see the extension of Hogwarts' grounds all the way to the mountains, though they were partially covered by mid-day fog and too far away to make out more than their general triangular peaked shape. He was stroking his beard, a habit which he'd lost sometime in his early eighties and then later recovered in his early hundreds during the war with Voldemort. If his memory wasn't failing him, he could remember a time when, much like young Harry Potter, his fingers would automatically gravitate to pull on the strands of hair on his head in times of great stress.

And being regarded as one of the wizarding world's most favourite cure-all for all their problems tended to mean that there were many times of stress in his long life.
He was currently busy attempting to plan a successful strategy for approaching Harry when he arrived. Dumbledore recognized that his previous methods hadn't exactly been a failure but with this new, more grown up version of the young Mr Potter, he found himself quite disarmed as to how to go about talking to him.

Pushing up his half moon glasses with a slender, if wrinkled, finger, Dumbledore came to the conclusion that he could no longer treat the young man like a child as he felt that that would not go over well at all. And yet, he felt uncomfortable viewing him as an adult, for that required entrusting him with possessing a certain level of maturity and rationality that Dumbledore was just not entirely sure the boy possessed. Or if he did, then his heart got in the way of it more often than not.

“OH FAWKES, DEAR FRIEND, WHAT SHOULD I DO?”

The phoenix in question spared him a glance from grooming his feathers and offered a no more than a soft twitter in reply before returning to his task.

“Well you're no help at all now, are you?” Dumbledore grumbled.

Three clear knocks on wood sounded around the room, as though projected from a speaker, and Dumbledore let out a sigh. He took out his wand from the pocket in his orange robes and jabbed the air at different points, ending his spell with a forceful slash.

He felt the familiar tickling sensation starting in his legs and spreading to the rest of his body as magic rendered his form immaterial and allowed him to fall through the rocking chair, through the floor at his feet and landing lightly — with a small thump — upon the high-backed chair behind his office desk.

“_ENTER!” He called out.

The door swung open with a small nudge and Harry Potter walked in, making a beeline for the empty chairs on the other side of the desk from the professor. He stood, waiting politely.

“HARRY, PLEASE, SIT. LEMON DROP?”

“No, thank you, sir. I'll pass this time.” He'd settled himself comfortable by this point, his eyes flitting about around the room as though he were taking it in for the first time.

‘OR PLANNING AN ESCAPE,’ THOUGHT DUMBLEDORE.

“Harry, I've asked you here foremost to congratulate you on the first task. If your aim was to impress the judges then I dare say, you've got us all at the edge of our seats wondering how and what you'll do next. We had feared that, seeing as how you're at such a delicate disadvantage from the rest, that you would—”

“—fail miserably and make a fool out of myself? Perhaps even lose a limb or two as I completed a task that I never had any business accomplishing?” Harry interrupted him bitterly. “Yeah, you could say the same has crossed my mind — several times.”

Dumbledore felt himself physically reeling back from his student's venomous words, not having expected the depth of the anger clearly harboured by Harry.

“Harry, it was never our intention to—”

“I'm sure it was never anyone's intention to have me play in this game of yours — except for the person who put me there, obviously. Unless you think I did it. Trust me, you would be far from the
“I don’t believe you put your name in the Goblet, Harry,” Dumbledore was quick to assure. He didn’t want to give Harry any more reasons to be upset with him than he already had and this one at least was easy to dispel. “I do think that whomever placed your name in the Goblet had a clear reason for doing so and it would be foolish to assume he or she did it out of the goodness of their heart... I discovered no enchantment placed on the Goblet other than the ones done at the Ministry, which means that—”

“—someone must have gotten to the Goblet while it was still at the Ministry of Magic, before coming to Hogwarts.” Harry finished his thought.

“Yes.”

A heavy silence followed, unspoken words and damning conclusions filling the empty space between the only two people in the room.

“I hear from Professor McGonagall that your studies and level of magical proficiency have greatly improved from last year,” Dumbledore remarked all too innocently. “Both factors which were addressed this summer, I presume—other than the obvious, that is.”

“And yet, you still haven’t outright asked me,” said Harry all of a sudden.

“Asked you what, Harry?”

“Where I live. Why I left. Who I’m staying with. What I’ve been doing during the summer. How much I’ve changed since coming back this year. You’d hardly be the first one to point it out. I know you must be dying to know—especially since you’ve been making sure I stayed locked away in Privet Drive ever since Voldemort killed my parents because of that damn prophecy.”

“The prophecy.” Dumbledore stated, his tone tinged with disbelief. “You know about... But how?”

“My parents greatly admired you, Professor, as I’m sure many other people still do as well, but they were not about to let you decide for them what would be best for their own safety, never mind the safety of their own child. They told their dearest and most trusted friends just in case anything were to happen to them, so that they would know what to expect when they took care of me.”

Harry had spoken at great length with Sirius and Remus about this very matter and he was more grateful now than ever before that the two men had been able to provide Harry with so many missing pieces from his parents' lives.

“I-I see.” Dumbledore shook off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, sensing the oncoming headache that would ensue. “You know then, why it was so important that you remain in Privet Drive with your aunt – your only surviving blood relative.”

“I know why you thought I should remain with Petunia,” Harry retorted.

“Harry please, you must understand—”

“Nothing.” Harry cut him off, clenching his jaw with the effort it took not to jump over the desk and shake the old wizard. “I have nothing left to understand because what I have understood so far is that you were more than willing to leave me with those sorry excuses for human beings while they starved me, beat me and deprived me of anything that they could think of just because I was born a wizard! You had no right to do that! I should have been left with Sirius, or Remus, or any other witch or wizard that actually wanted to have me! Did you know that I didn’t know my name was first.”
Harry until I started school? That up until that point I thought my name was 'boy' because that's what "they" called me on a good day.” He paused to gather himself.

He didn't know when but at some point during his speech, Harry had risen from his chair and began pacing the study, never once taking his eyes off of Dumbledore. On his end, the old wizard was leaning heavily against the back of his chair, hands clawing at the ends of the armrests as he listened to the boy in front of him confess to demons that he hadn't even known he had to bear.

"Maybe you'll say that you didn't know, and maybe I'll let myself believe you because it's better than accepting the alternative, but you had no right to do that to me. Baby, child, teen or adult – you should not have made that call because it was not yours to make. It was my parents' and they had left instructions that you should have followed to the letter because they were dead and I was not – I survived, and I could have lived a happy life if you'd let me. But you didn't.”

Silence.

Harry was standing firm in front of the door, signs of his inner turmoil being broadcasted in his shiny eyes, clenching fists and rock stiff posture. Dumbledore did not need anyone there to tell him that the boy in front of him had just revealed his greatest nightmares and shame to him. Nor did he need anyone to explain to him that one of the main reasons why Harry had been subjected to those horrible things in the first place was sitting in front him, slumped down at his desk, tears marking his face and running down into his beard, feeling older than his age would ever have you believe.

“Harry, if I had known...” Dumbledore wanted to believe that he would have saved him, would have put the needs of the one before the good of the many, but he honestly wasn't sure. And that scared him.

Allowing himself to let go of the tension inside him, Harry took back his seat before the headmaster and appraised him. He chided himself for feeling worried about the other man who looked like the broom had been stolen right from under him and he was left in the air, free-falling.

“I know what you're thinking,” Harry started, his voice no louder than a whisper. “You think it wouldn't have done much good anyway if you had known and had removed me from their house and placed me somewhere else, with a loving family, giving me a normal childhood. You think that in the long run it wouldn't have mattered much because I am still going to die. Right?”

Dumbledore forced himself to answer him, to confirm his suspicions and let him know that he truly believed the boy's time in this world was limited at best. He nodded. He searched for his voice.

“I never wanted this for you, Harry. For anyone. I tried to kill Voldemort myself, I tried so many times but he always managed to escape and it wasn't until I listened to the prophecy that I understood why I'd never been able to defeat him. I was never meant to in the first place, it wasn't my battle to fight, no matter how much the wizarding world wished that I would be their saviour. It was not my destiny – it was yours.”

“But the prophecy says that neither one of us can live while the other is still alive, it doesn't mean that we both have to die for the world to be safe from Voldemort. If I ever had any hope of defeating him, any hope of killing him before he killed me, then that was all blown to dust the minute you decided to keep the prophecy to yourself, to put me in the care of people who, not only hated me, but were also muggles,” said Harry.

It was almost painful for Harry to picture what his life could have been like if he'd been raised surrounded by magic like Ron had been. To have that kind of confidence in your abilities, to know that you weren't a freak or a demon-child for being able to do things that no one else around you
could. To know that you had the means to protect yourself and would one day be able to accomplish so much more.

“I could have had a chance!” Harry exclaimed. “I could have been taught from a young age, I could have been helped, I could have been saved! But you didn't see it that way, did you? You might as well have put an apple in my mouth and served me on a silver platter to Voldemort himself.”

The surprising crack of breaking glass momentarily called their attention to the window on the far side of the room which now sported a spiderweb of lines splintering out from the centre of the pane. Dumbledore gazed at it for a moment longer than necessary, using the distraction to try and salvage an appropriate explanation from the jumble of disconnected thoughts in his mind.

“I am so sorry, Harry. I thought I was doing the right thing, making the correct decision for the greater good, even if it meant that it would be at the expense of a few. However, that does not excuse the pain that I have caused you. I never wanted you to suffer.”

His apology did not fully encompass the extent of his guilt and regret but it was the best that he could do at the moment, words being the only means that he had to convey to the boy sitting in front of him that he had truly not meant to darken his life so unequivocally and drastically.

When he received no response, Dumbledore continued, “And even now, I failed to once again provide you with a safe home in Hogwarts. How your name ended up in the Goblet, I do not know, and it was never my intention to have you in harm's way. I apologize for it all, Harry. I wish there was something I could do to show you how much I regret my actions...” He let his remark trail off, knowing that nothing he could say or do would ever make up for the things he'd inadvertently put Harry through.

“You can stop treating me like I'm a child.” Having not expected Harry to so much as acknowledge his sentiment, Dumbledore was surprised when the young wizard finally spoke up, directing himself to the headmaster in a way that not many before him had done for fear of the formidable man's power. “All these decisions you've made for me, I could accept them for when I was a baby and maybe even before I came to Hogwarts but the moment I walked through the doors of the school you should've told me something – anything. And if not then, after the mess with Quirrell, or Riddle, or even Pettigrew. I asked you, I specifically went to you and asked why these things kept happening to me and you didn't say a thing.”

This was one of the things that had been bothering Harry the most about the venerable headmaster's behaviour towards him and it felt great to finally voice those thoughts to the man himself.

“I thought that perhaps, if I were to keep the truth from you for just a little bit longer, just until you became older and more capable of handling such news, then I would be saving what little childhood you deserved to have. I didn't know at that point that my efforts were in vain and you'd already been robbed of that experience.” Dumbledore shook his head in sorrow and propped his glasses back on the bridge of his nose. He took out his wand and fiddled with it slightly, producing a full tea set and a pot of the steaming black beverage, no doubt taken from the Hogwarts kitchen.

The headmaster took comfort in the routine task of pouring tea, adding the sugar and milk and stirring slowly, thoughtfully assessing what he wanted to say next.

“I received a letter from Padfoot right around the time you left Privet Drive. I can't say I wasn't...frustrated at being kept in the dark about your whereabouts and safety – a feeling which I am certain you are familiar with, no thanks to my behaviour towards you,” he let go of a self-deprecating smile, the wrinkles around his eyes bellying guilt and shame. Harry felt better seeing this – proof that the older wizard understood the gravity of his mistakes and felt enough remorse to not wish to repeat
them anytime soon.

“He told me,” said Harry. “He wanted to let you know so that you wouldn’t go overboard in searching for me. We figured it wouldn't do much good and you'd still try to find out where I was, but it was necessary that you know I wasn't being held captive by an axe murderer,” they shared small smiles.

“With the new evidence that came to light last year and what you have shared with me today, I think it would be best if we could reach a truce, Harry. I will not pester you about returning to Privet Drive as I see now that it would benefit no-one to have you back with Petunia Dursley and her husband, but I will insist on keeping the channels of communication open between us.” The headmaster leaned forward on his desk, clasping his hands together and piercing Harry with his unnerving stare. “Defeating Voldemort will be difficult enough without the Light side being at odds with each other. Trust must be earned and I have done little to show you that you can rely on me, but I will strive to change that. If we have even the faintest of hopes in ending this war then we must work together.”

The truth of the headmaster's statement resonated within Harry. He knew that no matter his personal reservations with the venerable wizard, it would be foolish to even consider not accepting the man's support in this fight to come. Stewing in hurt feelings and horrible memories would serve no purpose other than draw an even greater rift between the two of them. Eventually he'd have to learn to forgive... Just maybe not yet.

One step at a time. Dumbledore had already taken the first step in apologizing and extending a tentative olive branch.

Harry grabbed onto it.

“Before coming to Hogwarts, I had this dream...” And he told him exactly what the dream was about, their suspicions on what it meant, what it could still mean, and also his fear that events were unfolding much earlier than the headmaster had anticipated.

Once he was finished updating the headmaster on his dream and its implications, the man merely reclined in his chair and stroked his beard, his eyes looking at Harry, unseeing and absorbing the information he'd been given.

“I think it is safe to say that considering how this year has turned out so far for you, Voldemort and Pettigrew could have only been talking about the Triwizard Tournament, although how they managed to get access to that kind of information and also the cup will need to be investigated immediately.” He sighed deeply. “I don't think there's much else left for us to do right now, Harry, other than keep our eyes open and our ears close to the ground. I will look into this further myself and get back to you if I find anything.”

Harry nodded in response and stood up. Hearing Dumbledore himself say that he would keep him informed of what was going on meant more to him than he was willing to admit out loud. The chiming of a grandfather clock in the corner reminded him of the late hour – dinner would be starting soon and he didn't want to miss the opportunity of going over what had happened in this office with his friends.

“I should get going, Professor, it's almost time for dinner.”

“Oh yes, of course, we wouldn't want all the house-elves' hard work to go to waste,” Dumbledore smiled and stood up as well, making his way around his desk and stopping before Harry. “I do hope this marks a new beginning for our relationship, Harry, perhaps one where I can make up for all the mistakes I've made in our previous one.” He extended an age-creased hand.
Harry waffled only slightly before shaking the man's hand.

“I think it might, Professor.”

Harry was already halfway down the stairs when a call from above urged him to look up.

“Mr Potter! I suggest that if you're having trouble cracking the egg, so to speak, I think you would find it helpful to take a walk outside one evening, enjoy the fresh air and the moony night sky.” The headmaster's eyes twinkled at him like two tiny stars.

Memories of grindylows, boggarts, dementors and seventh year spells flashed through Harry's mind. *Of course! Who better to help with a deadly task than the best Defence teacher Hogwarts has ever seen?* Harry thought.

“Will do, Professor.”

And so he left, feeling slightly less burdened than he had been since the beginning of that summer.
Dear Mum and Dad,

How are things at the Burrow? There's not much going on here that you don't know about already... Ron finally got his head out of his arse and properly apologized to Harry for being such a prat (I'm sorry, but that's exactly what he was like, mum, and we both know it), George got it into his head that he absolutely needed Almantigork flower petals for the latest 'invention' the twins have brewing and so Fred obviously had to sneak into one of the Herbology greenhouses to nip the rose at the bud, so to speak.

Turns out, he got nipped instead! The Almantigork did not take kindly to having its flowers stolen and it attacked him! I went to see him at the infirmary this morning and he's got winding red marks all over his arms and legs from where the plant's vines tried to snag him. Madam Pomfrey gave him a good talking to, but it was nothing compared to what Professor McGonagall had to say. I think Professor Sprout actually felt a bit sorry for Fred since she didn't say anything once Professor McGonagall was done with him, and she'd come in looking in a right state, too.

I suspect you'll be getting a letter from the school soon (but you didn’t hear this from me).

As for me, there’s not much new to share. Classes are going well and I think people are starting to forgive and forget, as they say... at least they don’t shy away from me in the halls anymore so it’s a step in the right direction, I suppose.

I-

A high-pitched shriek from downstairs pulled Ginny away from her letter. She lifted her head from the parchment, resting her quill carefully on the table and pushing off the dark wooden desk. She stretched her arms high above her head and enjoyed the satisfying pop of her back.

Her arms had dropped to her sides just as a girl with short blonde hair and a pointy nose came barging into the room. She let the door slam behind her but turned back at the last minute – apparently not entirely satisfied with the commotion – and swung it open only to kick it shut again, revelling in the gratifying thump it made.

“Bad day?” Ginny asked.

“Bad day? Bad day!” screeched the girl. “It wasn't a bad day until ten minutes ago when freaking Thomas burned off my eyebrows and turned my hands green in potions!” she whirled around on Ginny and shoved her hands forward.

“Oh. I see,” Ginny had no idea what else she could say to the girl. Clearly she was not in search for comfort and Ginny would be hard pressed to lie to her room-mate and say the damage wasn’t that bad as her lack of eyebrows turned her forehead comically large and made her pointy nose an all the more prominent feature on her round face. She looked like an irritated elf.

But Ginny couldn't tell her that.

“I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will have you fixed up in no time,” Ginny reassured her.

The other girl merely grunted and continued her rampage around the room, tossing clothing on the floor, violently yanking at the curtains around her bed and having a thirteen-year-old girl's tantrum.
As discreetly as possible, Ginny sneaked out of the room and made her way out of the Gryffindor tower, down the school's halls, straight to the entrance of the kitchens. The pear on the tapestry seemed to jiggle and bounce in delight as she softly ran her fingers over the fabric, tickling the magic fruit and entering through the secret door once the fanciful pear had had one last giggle.

“Miss Ginny! Miss Ginny! You came to visit Dobby again!” a particular set of flappy ears and lanky, pastel limbs greeted Ginny as she entered the Hogwarts kitchens.

“Dobby,” Ginny greeted him warmly, “it feels like it's been such a long time since I've come by to see how you all have been doing down here.”

Unlike the first time she'd come down here, Ginny now knew what to expect when the small elf’s bony arms and legs wrapped themselves around her torso and squeezed her so hard, she was sure he was bruising a few precious ribs.

“Just by showing up at all, Miss Ginny has made Dobby's entire week that much better,” the house-elf grinned so far and wide that Ginny was worried his cheeks would one day become stuck in that position forever. “Sit, sit, Miss Ginny. You must not stay standing for so long when there are so many house-elves here to take care of you.”

As if waiting for their queue, a group of house-elves materialised themselves around Ginny and ushered her to a table nearby, plopping her down on a chair before setting up an ornately decorated table with enough food to feed all six of her brothers and company.

Ginny had long since learned not to get in the house-elves' way when they were working and simply kept silent and still as they bustled around her and served her food and drink. She made sure to thank them profusely after they were done and was rewarded with many twitching ears, coyly averted eyes and exuberant half-smiles.

“Tell me, Dobby, how is Winky doing? Is she still having trouble adjusting to her new life?” Every time she had come down to the kitchens this year, Winky had been in one state or another. Whether it was drowning her sorrows in a bottle, crying out her frustrations onto her meagre scraps of clothes, or throwing a fit in the middle of the room at the cosmic injustice of it all – there was always something the matter with that particular house-elf.

“Winky is not doing so well, Miss Ginny,” Dobby's ears flattened over his bald head. “She does not want to believe that Mister Crouch has let her free and continues to say that her master will eventually come back to get her. She thinks that Mister Crouch is in dire need of help and only she can serve him.”

“So, nothing has changed,” Ginny spooned some food onto her plate and took a large bite, not wanting to let all the house-elves' hard work go to waste.

“No, Miss Ginny,” Dobby hesitated, “Dobby thinks Winky may never recover at Hogwarts. She does not like it here and says that her purpose is to care for Mr Crouch. Perhaps if Mr Crouch were to take her back—”

A commotion at the end of the room interrupted their conversation and they looked over just in time to witness Winky herself stumble out from under one of the high-set ovens. She looked worse than Ginny remembered her. Her clothes were hanging from her like a noose, her knees and elbows were stained with dirt and grime and the bottle that she dragged along behind her like an obedient dog was already more than half empty.

The house-elf slurred a couple of words to no-one in particular and plonked herself down in the
middle of the floor, legs painted out in front of her like an upside-down v. Closing her left eye, she brought her right one to the mouth of the bottle and tilted it up, up and up, searching for the drink that had become her most faithful companion during the last tiring months. Her tolerance must not have improved since the last time Ginny saw her as it took the house-elf pouring alcohol into her eye for her to realize that she had tipped the bottle too far. Winky sputtered, shrieked and whined until she brought the glass back to her lips and suckled the last dregs of the drink like a baby feeding off its mother's breast – an unsettling comparison, to be sure.

“I think it might take a bit more than just that to shake Winky out of this one, Dobby,” Ginny softly murmured.

By then, a couple of house-elves had gathered up the courage to approach the melancholy elf. They snatched the bottle out of her limp hands and covered her shrunken form with a white tablecloth. They scarcely interacted with her outside of hiding her state from prying eyes before dispersing like ants at a picnic and returning to their duties.

“Dobby tries to help Winky as much as he can but he must work as well and the other house-elves...” he clamped his mouth shut, unable to speak ill of his companions.

“I understand, Dobby,” Ginny smiled. “It's not your duty to look after Winky after all and the fact that you even try says a lot about the type of elf you are.”

Dobby visibly preened. “Thank you, Miss Ginny.”

A drone of excited elven voices started to make its way to Dobby and Ginny, both of whom turned just in time to watch as Harry, Hermione and Ron strode into the kitchens. They were met – especially Harry – with an audience far greater than the one Ginny was afforded as it seemed that every single elf in the castle was falling over themselves in trying to give The Boy Who Lived the welcome that he deserved.

“—but Harry, please... they’ll listen to you better than they would ever listen to me and you know that if you just—” Hermione was cut off before she had a chance to continue what sounded like a well-practiced argument.

“Hermione, for the last time, no. You saw yourself what the tower is like now that you’ve started leaving clothes everywhere for them to find — you could take a picture of our common room and put it next to a pig sty and no one would be able to tell the difference. These elves are happy here and they don’t want to be forced into freedom,” Harry reasoned.

“But if you would just—”

“Oh Hermione, would you just give it up already,” Ron sighed. “You can’t hope to tackle a reality that has been present for centuries by making a fuss about it now for a few weeks. If the house-elves are saying they’re happy and Dumbledore’s treating them well then I say you let them be.”

“They’re just saying that because they don’t know any better. It’s like asking someone whether they prefer chocolate or vanilla ice-cream when they haven’t even tasted chocolate – they have no business answering that question without all the facts,” she argued.

“Listen, you don’t have to try either one of those to know the right answer to that question, but now that we’re on the matter of food,” Ron turned to closest elf, “where can I find me some of that ice-cream that Hermione was just talking about?”

Ginny laughed at her brother’s antics and the sound caught the three Gryffindor’s attention at last.
“Ginny! I didn’t know we’d find you here,” Hermione had walked closer and leaned over for a light hug.

“I like to come by sometimes — ever since last year — to visit the house-elves, especially Dobby, and also just stay around for a while… the kitchens here kind of remind me of the Burrow for some reason. What are you lot doing here?” said Ginny.

“Ron and I came here for the food and company,” Ginny tried not to laugh as a group of eavesdropping house-elves broke out into happy titters, “but Hermione came by for purely political reasons – she’s hoping to start a revolution at Hogwarts and she’s looking for volunteers so I’d watch out if I were you, Ginny,” said Harry.

“Really, Harry, you should not be so blasé about this, it is a real issue that needs to—”

“This again?” Ron interrupted. “Come on, Hermione, we’re in the kitchens getting offered delicious free food and service by perfectly content workers and this is how you want to spend your time here?”

“Ron, if you would just…”

Harry and Ginny had both seen this same dance performed many times over and knew when it was their cue to get out of those two’s way before they were inevitably brought into the argument as well.

“You know,” Harry began saying as they moved away from the quarrelling duo, “if sometime in the near future… I mean, whenever you feel like it again, I suppose… if you don’t want to come down to the kitchens alone – not that you couldn’t or anything like that, just if you want some company… unless you’d rather be alone to talk to Dobby, in which case—”

“Harry, I will let you know if I feel like some company next time,” Ginny valiantly tried to hold back the smirk that came from knowing that this was the Harry Potter fumbling his way to asking a girl if she’d like to spend more time with him.

“Good, good… that sounds good…” Harry bit his lip as his words trailed off into silence.

“The second task…” Ginny hesitated, “have you figured out the clue in the egg yet?”

“Not yet, no. I’ve listened to it at least twenty times already and I still can’t figure out what the sound even is – hopefully I’ll be more enlightened after talking to some family friends tonight,” said Harry.

“Even so, not to burst any bubbles here, but you’d still have to figure out how to pass the task once you know what it is,” said Ginny.

Harry laughed, “Trust me, you’re not telling me anything I haven’t already thought circles around.”

“You still have plenty of time to figure it out though,” she reassured him.

“Easier said than done,” he mumbled.

“Potter and Weasley, if you do not cut out that incessant racket this very instant I shall have you both sent to the Headmaster’s office before you can even say bezoar,” Snape’s dark robe billowed out around him as he whirled around from the blackboard and fixed them with his punishing glare.

“Wha – but we weren’t doing —” Ron began only to be cut off with a sharp elbow to his kidney.

“Apologies Professor,” Harry pushed out through gritted teeth, “it will not happen again.”
“Make sure it doesn’t, Potter.” Snape then continued with the lecture, “Unless any one of you plans on having the school sucked into a black vortex deprived of time and space then you better listen carefully when I say the following…”

Ironically (if not stupidly) enough, that was about the exact moment that Harry stopped listening to the professor and let his drawled out sentences settle somewhere deep in his subconscious where they would not cause much harm. He wasn’t worried about this potion. He’d done it before at Grimmauld Place under the precise tutelage of one surprisingly adept Sirius Black so he knew the risks involved and how to avoid them.

In fact, over the years he had realised that it wasn’t the subject that bothered him or the level of dexterity involved (as much as Snape would like to think otherwise, potions was at least in the same book as cooking, if not in the same chapter) but rather the hook-nosed man who taught the class. Over the course of his life, Harry had been on the receiving end of many a bully’s frustrations — including his own cousin’s — but he felt that it wasn’t too much to expect Snape and his father’s rivalry to have remained exactly where it belonged: in the past.

‘I suppose there’s worse things to inherit rather than your late father’s school enemy,’ Harry thought.

With only ten minutes of the class left and having already cleaned out his potions instruments, Harry sat himself down to stare at the clock hanging on the wall as he urged the time to pass by faster.

“As you are all surely cleaning out your cauldrons by now and handing in your potions, you will listen to the announcement that I have to make and not interrupt… And for those of you who have yet to finish, well…” Snape blatantly stared at Neville’s boiling potion and let his statement trail off menacingly. “As part of the Triwizard Tournament, a Yule Ball will be held to celebrate the event on Christmas day.”

Parvati and Lavender squealed from the back of the room. Snape pursed his lips.

“Every student from fourth year and above will be permitted to attend, whereas anyone in the lower years can only participate with the invitation from someone from the grades above,” Snape paused. “I was told to lay particular emphasis on the behaviour expected out of our Hogwarts students — but seeing as how half our class is comprised of hot-headed buffoons,” —the Slytherins snickered— “I fail to see a reason for it. Class dismissed.”

The bell rang and the scuffle of scraping chairs and zipped bags drowned out any further insult that Snape could’ve thrown at them.

The three Gryffindors walked up to the Great Hall and sat down for dinner amidst more animated company than the night before.

“Word about the ball must have gotten around already then,” commented Hermione. “I honestly don’t see the point in getting as excited about it as Lavender and Parvati,” she glanced over to peek at the two girls in question (who were clearly talking about the same thing if their giggles and squeals were anything to go by), “although I suppose the opportunity to get to know the other schools in a more relaxed setting is rather nice to think about.”

“Of course you don’t understand, Hermione, you’re not like other girls,” Harry inwardly groaned at Ron’s careless comment.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Hermione asked coolly.
“Just that you don’t care about looking pretty and dressing nice like the other girls in our year do,” Ron continued piling food on his plate as he spoke, “you’re more into books and studying and that kinda stuff.”

Harry wanted to stuff Ronald’s mouth with the chicken on his plate and watch as he choked and became unable to say another careless word. He honestly did not know what went through his friend’s thick skull to not be able to see the bomb that he’d just detonated.

“I think what he’s trying to say, Hermione,” Harry cut in swiftly, “is that you’re not into those things because you don’t need to use them like they do – you have the looks and smarts to have any guy here, and you don’t need pretty clothes or makeup to do that.”

Hermione’s scowl faded into downturned eyes and an embarrassed smile.

“Harry, that was…” she trailed off.

“Nothing but the truth, Hermione,” he finished for her. “You are one of the smartest people I know so I’m surprised you didn’t already know it by now. I suppose it’s about time somebody told you then,” he smiled.

Hermione simply nodded at him, smiling and not saying another word.

He didn’t want to be too obvious about it, but Harry felt like heaving in as much air around him as possible and letting it out in the biggest sigh of relief anyone has ever heard in history. He knew that he wouldn’t always be around to minimize the damage from Ron’s constantly running mouth, but at least Hermione wasn’t left hurt or angry this time.

After that mild brush with potential disaster, the rest of their meal went on without incident. They ate and they drank until they couldn’t stomach anything else and ambled along to their tower. They were just about to step past the portrait of the Fat Lady when a shout — “Potter!” — echoed down the hall.

“Potter, I really do apologize for interrupting you before you could go to bed but I must talk to you at once,” Professor McGonagall exclaimed as she reached the trio. “Weasely. Granger. This will only take a moment of Potter’s time, I assure you.”

Taking the dismissal, Ron and Hermione exchanged twin quizzical looks with Harry before making their way into the common room.

“Does this have something to do with the second task, professor?” Harry asked.

Professor McGonagall looked puzzled. “No no, this has nothing to do with the second task — although I am sure that you are putting in your best effort and then some to make your school and house proud” she quirked an eyebrow, “— this pertains to a much more imminent matter. Potter,” she looked him square in the eye, “can you dance?”

At that moment, Harry could swear he heard the wheels and cogs in his brain halting their movement and then working in reverse as his mind attempted to make sense of the question.

“Can I dance?” his answer did not impress her in the least. “I recently learned a bit of dance – but I’m not planning on dancing anytime soon, professor, if I’m honest.”

“You must know how to dance for when the Yule Ball comes around, Potter. I will not have this school ridiculed on the basis of one of her champion’s dancing skills,” she insisted. “I am sure you don’t wish to begin the night on a bad note — nevermind with everyone watching your every step
“Hold on — excuse me, professor — you just said everyone would be watching…” Harry’s sentence trailed off as realization dawned on him.

“I see Professor Snape failed to pass certain details along to you. The champions will be the ones to open the ball, Potter – essentially meaning that the four of you and your partners will be the ones to perform the first dance,” she paused meaningfully, “and it has always gone along splendidly.”

“I’m sure,” Harry palmed his face.

“I will be holding voluntary dance classes for those students who wish not to make a fool of themselves at the ball — they are mandatory for you unless you can prove to be an adequate dancer. Goodnight Potter,” Professor McGonagall turned neatly on her heel and left.

“Goodnight Professor,” Harry said, head still in a daze from what he’d just learned.

The day after the announcement of the Yule Ball, it seemed to Harry that the female population of Hogwarts had suddenly grown bigger and more intimidating than ever. Everywhere he went, he could feel their eyes tracking him, weighing him down with their expectation and hopes to be asked out by not only a Hogwarts champion, but also Harry Potter himself. Giggling, blushing and high pitched whispering became a second shadow to him. Meals were the worst. In class, he could at least pretend the whispering and not-so-subtle finger pointing wasn’t about him but when surrounded by ten times that amount of people when in the Great Hall, it was difficult not to overhear his name as it was tossed from mouth to mouth.

“It’s not as if you aren’t used to this by now,” said Hermione, “I mean, let’s face it, this won’t be the last time you’re at the forefront of everyone’s thoughts - especially the girls.”

“Still don’t have to like it,” Harry flinched as a group of fifth year girls passed them by on the hallway, their trill laughter and speculating eyes washing over him.

“I don’t think many people expect you to,” she pulled an unimpressed face.

“I, for one, wouldn’t mind a little attention from the ladies,” Ron added, “I mean, you have to admit, it can’t be that bad that they’re falling over themselves wanting to be your date to the ball… At least not everyone's the same way — Fleur seems to be doing alright… Do you think I should her?”

“Ask her what?” said Harry.

“Ask her if she wants to go with me to the ball,” Ron carefully skated around a girl who was too busy making heart eyes at Harry to notice she was standing in the middle of the hallway.

“She’s half Veela,” Hermione reasoned, “she must have a date by now — I doubt many boys would’ve been able to resist her,” she finished (somewhat bitterly in Harry’s opinion).

“Yeah, you’re right,” Ron deflated a bit.

“In any case, Harry should be the one most concerned with getting a date for the ball if he’s going to be opening the dance for the night. Have you thought of anyone you’d like to ask, Harry? Perhaps someone you know you would have a good time with?” Hermione shifted her eyes to the side where, coming up with a group of third year students, was Ginny.

Harry rolled his eyes and ignored the red flush creeping up the back of his neck. He ran a hand through his hair and replied with, “I’m still thinking about it,” and nothing more was said on the
subject as they switched to discussing another topic.

Truth was that as much as Harry knew that if he was going to invite anyone to the ball, it would be Ginny, it still didn’t make it any easier to actually pop the question. He was sure that his palms hadn’t sweated this much when he’d been about to face the Hungarian Horntail and his heart certainly hadn’t felt like it was about to beat out of his chest. He never thought he’d say it, but bring him another round with the deadliest dragon in the world any day and he would take it over asking a girl to a dance.

And from the clammy looks of several other fellows in his year as they all sat down on the benches now lining the walls of the Transfiguration classroom, he’d say he wasn’t the only one feeling nervous.

“Good morning everyone,” Professor McGonagall began. “As you all now know, the Yule Ball is a very important tradition which forms part of the Triwizard Tournament and should therefore be treated not only as a chance to—” her lips thinned out to a mere line “—let down one’s hair, but to also take a step forward into interschool relations and learning from one’s peers.

“That is to say, whilst we have fun learning about Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, I will not have this school ridiculed because its students don’t know how to dance a simple waltz.”

Professor McGonagall strode out into the centre of the room and waved her wand in the air in a series of movements that Harry was sure he’d seen before. Music started flowing through the room and the students broke out into nervous giggles and fidgeting.

“Potter,” —Professor McGonagall waved him over— “you first.”

Ron snickered next to him and thumped him on the back. Harry merely nodded and walked up to the middle of the room. He tried to recall those dancing lessons with Alice that Sirius had insisted he take once he learned that his godson had no idea how to dance.

“Now remember, Harry, you don’t want to be pushing your partner around the dancefloor - you want to smoothly, but firmly, guide them with your own body. Allow them to follow your lead,” Alice explained to him.

“Like this?” He squeezed her hand and gently pushed against her waist, moving her backwards.

“Better,” she smiled, “but it’s not just about the pushing, you also have to have your own body follow with the movements. Think of it as a game of see-saw — if you move up, then your partner has to move down. Your movements need to complement each other. Let’s try it from the top,” she waved her wand in the air and a waltz drifted from the wireless. “Count in your head but don’t let the steps overwhelm you… Feel the music as well. One. Two. Three. One. Two…”

And they danced. Granted, Harry wasn’t going to win any prizes anytime soon, but he could dance to a decent tune now and that was all that he needed.

“Well well well,” Sirius’ voice oozed mischief as he leaned against the doorway of the room, “if it isn’t my little godson, all grown up and getting ready to impress the ladies. Just remember, pup, if you need protection, all you have to do is ask,” Sirius grinned. “Now step aside, chump, and let me show you how it’s really done.”

With that, Sirius extricated Alice from Harry’s hold and swept her off into a set of complicated steps that others would have a hard time following. Another nudge of a wand and the music changed to a more upbeat version of the same style. Sirius continued to pull Alice across the room and
occasionally dipped her in a move that had her heaving a surprised shriek of laughter. His own barking laugh soon joined hers.

Just as he’d been taught to do, Harry gave a brief bow before the dance could begin. Professor McGonagall’s eyebrows heaved up to her hairline as she curtsied regally in return. Taking his professor in his arms, Harry prayed to every God and Goddess out there that he wouldn’t step on her toes as he began to twirl her around the room.

Intrigued chatter erupted amongst the crowd as they watched Harry and Professor McGonagall almost perfectly follow each other’s cues and anticipate their partner’s next step with apparent ease. The song came to an end and the two dancers halted their twirling and spinning.

“Very well done, Potter,” Professor McGonagall smiled.

“Thank you, professor,” Harry bowed once more and spun on his heel to return to his seat.

“I hope you all took a good look to see what Mr Potter was capable of and that it encourages you put as much effort as he clearly did with his own studies in dance. Now, everyone pick a partner and find a place to practice. You will follow my lead.”

Harry stuck to the sidelines as he observed his year clumsily shuffle their feet in a mockery of a square formation. Ron had his eyes glued to his feet and his ears burning red as he held Padma Patil at arm’s length. Hermione seemed to be doing marginally better with a tall boy from Ravenclaw. In the centre of the room stood Neville partnered with Professor McGonagall attempting to demonstrate the correct steps to Seamus and Dean, who had ended up with each other. When Neville managed stumble on his feet for the third time in a row, Harry lamented that his efforts to help the boy retain some semblance of balance hadn’t worked out as, in Neville’s words, at the end of the day, he really didn’t need another reason for other people to make fun of him.

The weeks leading up to the Yule Ball contained some of the most drama filled teenage crises that the school had ever seen. From couples breaking up to new ones emerging to both boys and girls fighting with each other about who would ask who to the ball — in short, it was something Harry could’ve done without.

With three weeks to go and no impending apocalypse in sight to prevent the inevitable, Harry finally reconciled with the fact that he’d have to pluck up enough courage to ask Ginny to the ball. It was ridiculous, he thought, that something so childish and benign would be capable of nearly bringing him to his knees and yet, it had.

Luckily for him, the universe decided to be kind to him for once.

It happened during one of those moments when their little group of friends had just finished eating lunch but were still sitting down at the table, making light conversation with each other and avoiding going to class until the last minute. It was just so that Neville had happened to mention that he had found a date to the Yule Ball — a fourth year girl named Sarah O’Reilly from Hufflepuff.

“And now Neville has a date as well?” Ron bemoaned. “Harry, we need to get a move on before all the good ones are taken,” he snuck a glance at the end of the Ravenclaw table where Fleur Delacour sat with the boy for whom she had rejected a blathering Ron.

“I’m going to have to agree with Ron on this one,” said Hermione, “the longer you wait, the less likely it will be that you’ll find someone that you like who isn’t already going with someone else. And this goes especially for you, Harry, what with you needing to arrive with someone and all.”
“I know that, Hermione. It’s pretty hard to forget that I’ll basically be one of eight dancing in front of hundreds of people,” Harry visibly shuddered.

“Well, I think you should get a move on. I heard that very soon you two will be the only Potter and Weasley without a date,” Hermione widened her eyes pointedly.

Harry cursed at himself. Of course someone else would want to ask Ginny to the Yule Ball. What was he thinking, waiting around all this time?

“I’ll be right back,” he scrambled off the bench and marched down the Gryffindor table to where a group of people were just about to head out the hall. “Ginny! Ginny, wait!”

Ginny had turned towards him when he’d called her name and waved her friends off as he closed the distance between them.

“Listen,” he coughed, “I was wondering — actually, I’ve been wondering for awhile now but I haven’t actually asked you yet — until now, that is, because I swear I’ll do it this time,” he took a deep breath. “Would you like to go to the ball with me?” She looked surprised. “And it’s alright if you say no… or if someone already asked you because why wouldn’t they? I just had to—”

“I would love to go to the ball with you, Harry,” she grinned. “And I hope you’re a good dancer because I will be expecting you to actually dance with me if I’m going to be on the arm of the great Harry Potter, Hogwarts champion,” she winked at him.

Stunned and relieved beyond words, all Harry could manage was a breathless promise that he would definitely take her dancing before Ginny was called away by her friends.

“I’ll see you later, Harry,” she raised herself on her tiptoes and left him reeling with a simple kiss to the cheek. He watched her walk off with a spring in her step.

He was dazed. And grinning like a fool, but he wasn’t planning on stopping any time soon. Back at the table, his group of friends were still talking about the Yule Ball as he sat back down.

“—it’s just that you’re a girl, right? I’m really desperate. And I doubt anyone has asked you yet so what do you say, Hermione?” Ron’s voice overcame the fog in Harry’s brain long enough for him to see that this was not going to end well.

“Gee, Ron, I guess I am a girl after all,” Hermione fumed. “One who already has a date to the ball, but thank you for thinking no boy in this school could possibly think of asking me, of all people, to go with them unless they were well and truly desperate,” she spat the word. “The bell will ring soon.”

Harry wanted to smack Ron across the head as Hermione violently swung her bag onto her shoulder and stomped off.

“I can’t believe you sometimes, Ron,” Harry said.

“What? How was I supposed to know someone had already asked her?” Ron crossed his arms across his chest.

“That’s not the point,” — the bell rang — “but know what? Nevermind, we should just get to class.”

They gathered their things and left the Great Hall.

Unlike previous years during Christmas at Hogwarts, this one saw its entire student body from
fourth year and above choosing to remain in the castle for the up and coming Yule Ball. The term had ended on a high note with only a few surprise tests here and there from a couple of teachers and a mountain of homework from every class imaginable. The workload was so great that Harry felt guilty he wasn’t spending more time writing three thousand word essays instead of standing by the sidelines — and occasionally helping — as the twins advertised their prank products, even when their clients were none the wiser until the moment the product burst in their faces. By the third day into the holidays, the students at Gryffindor tower had learned not to leave their food unattended and to certainly not accept anything from a preppy looking friend with a twinkle in their eye and fourteen Sickles lighter.

In the true spirit of Christmas the school was bedecked in themed decorations from its rafters to its dungeons (much to Professor Snape’s disgust). The holiday spirit had managed to snag everyone in its hold and though he wasn’t one to usually complain about good food, beautiful ornaments and Christmas cheer, Harry was truly dreading the moment that the pieces of armour, enchanted to erupt in song as one passed them by, would stop being funny and start being annoying.

“Jingle balls! Jingle balls! Jingle all the way! Oh what fun it is to ride on Santa’s big fat—”

“Peeves!” Hermione screeched. She levelled her wand at the suit of armour next to them and fired off a curse which sent the poltergeist flying out of the helmet, a trail of smoke wafting after him. “I cannot believe Dumbledore still allows that… scoundrel to walk the halls of Hogwarts after the many things he’s pulled.”

“I figure he just cuts his losses where he can. He can’t be bothered by rude pranks like those or else he’d have to get rid of the twins and then who would we turn to for some comedy fun?” Ron reasoned wisely.

“I suppose he does have more important things to worry about…” Hermione mused.

“Exactly! And that’s what we should be focusing on too. Now, I know none of us has a date to the ball yet and I figure that’s fine. I mean… it’s a little late in the game for sure but that doesn’t mean we have to give up — we have to stick together now more than ever,” said Ron.

“I already told you, Ron, I already have a date,” Hermione’s cheeks turned a light pink.

“Listen Hermione, I’m sorry that I made you mad when I said what I did those weeks ago, but you don’t have to pretend with us — we’re best friends,” Ron opened his arms out wide, as though enveloping the friendship they all shared.

“Ron,” Hermione snapped, “I meant what I said. Just because you’re the only one here who hasn’t had the courage to ask someone doesn’t mean everyone else is the same. Or that they didn’t notice that I am girl before you did!” Hermione huffed.

“Wha—you really have a date? With who?” said Ron sharply.

“It’s none of your business. You’ll find out in a couple of days anyway,” she tucked a curl behind her ear.

“Are you going with Harry?” Ron’s nostrils flared as his eyes darted between his two friends. “Is that what you meant when you said that I was the only one without a date?”

“What? No. Harry’s going with Ginny.”

Harry held his breath.
“You’re going to the Yule Ball with my baby sister and you didn’t think to ask me first!” Ron exploded.

Harry’s own temper responded, “Forgive me for thinking that I should ask her if she wanted to go to the ball with me. Remind me again when you were made her keeper, Ron.”

“She’s my baby sister, Harry! You can’t just ask her without telling me first,” Ron fumed.

Harry clenched his jaw. “Listen, I know I should have told you before, but things haven’t exactly been rainbows and sunshine between us lately, in case you didn’t notice,” Harry’s shoulders slumped. “But I should’ve told you.”

“Damn right you should have,” Ron glared at Harry one final time.

The three continued walking the castle in silence until they reached the open grounds.

“So now it’s just me then?” Ron sulked abruptly.

“Don’t worry mate, we’ll think of something,” said Harry.

And surprisingly enough, they did think of something. Ron hadn’t been the only boy in the school to have put getting a date till the last minute and so, after a few pokes around, they arrived at Parvati Patil. She’d been distraught at the thought that she would have to go to the Yule Ball alone whilst Lavender and her date pranced around in front of her. After that, the match was made quite simply and on the night of the ball, Ron was waiting anxiously by Harry’s side as they both waited for their dates to appear.

Ron sat slumped on one of the soft chairs in the common room, visibly pouting and huffing every so often as he pulled on the threads dangling from the cuffs of his robe. The severing charm had really done a number on the fabric and Ron was seriously debating on which was worst — looking like pigmy puff or the ghoul they allowed to stay in the Burrow’s attic. A piece of fluff from the collar of his hand-me-down robes got caught up his nose and he sneezed.

Harry considered his friend’s attire and, while he did agree with Ron that the robe was absolutely horrid, he thought it could certainly be worse — he could be wearing an actual dress. Or be going naked. Ron did not find it as funny as Harry had hoped.

“Alright, we’re coming down!” Ginny’s announcement had the boys scrambling to the bottom of girls’ staircase.

First down was Parvati. She looked very pretty in her cream gold, knee-length dress, which was draped across one shoulder, leaving the other one bare whilst her long, ebony hair fell freely down her back and gold bracelets winked at Ron from around her wrists and ankles. As she took the last step, she looked at Ron expectantly.

“Uhm… uh… Parvati, you look — very pretty in that dress,” Ron’s ears flushed pink and he gave her a flustered smile.

“Thanks, Ron,” Parvati grinned back.

While Ron and Parvati were getting the awkward pleasantries out of the way, Harry was left staring, transfixed, as Ginny glided down the staircase. She was wearing a simple dress, floor length with thin straps hugging her shoulders and coloured a deep, navy blue that made her hair look striking.

“I hope this is okay,” she said, “I know it’s not the best in highest fashion right now but it was
actually on sale and it was the prettiest dress there so I thought it would be okay—”

“You look beautiful, Gin,” Harry broke in, remembering advice that Sirius had given him a while ago. “The dress could have cost a million galleons or two sickles and it wouldn’t matter because it’s you that’s wearing it… and it’s you that looks great in it.”

Ginny beamed at him. “Thank you, Harry.”

“And all I got was very pretty,” Parvati muttered to herself.

The two couples climbed out of the portrait hole and strolled down to the main hall where they met with numerous other students from all three schools. Everyone was waiting for the clock to strike eight o’clock, the Great Hall doors to open and the sure to be memorable night to begin. Fleur and Cedric were standing in front of the doors accompanied by their respective dates and making light conversation. Harry waved at them.

“Where’s Hermione and this date she’s been going on about?” Ron grumbled.

“Oh my god, is that her?” Parvati gasped.

Hermione was coming down the grand staircase on the arm of Viktor Krum, looking resplendent with her hair tamed and curled up in a loose bun and a champagne coloured dress hugging her figure with little cap sleeves framing her arms. She was positively beaming once she made her way to the group.

“Hermione, you look gorgeous!” Ginny gushed.

“I could say the same thing about you, Gin,” said Hermione.

From beside Hermione, Viktor held a hand out to Harry. “Harry, it is very good to meet vith you under a different light and to be introduced to ‘Ermionniny’s close friends,” Krum squeezed his hand.

“Likewise, Krum,” Harry exchanged a look with Hermione as Krum shook his hand more tightly. “So… how did you two meet?”

“At the library,” Hermione seemed embarrassed to be sharing even that smallest of detail.

“Oh.”

For the life of him, Harry couldn’t find anything else to say and a glance to Ginny had them both thinking that the ball couldn’t start soon enough.

Then the clock struck eight and the doors opened, allowing everyone but the champions and their dates to enter. From the gap between the open doors, Harry could see that the Great Hall had never looked more extravagant. Hogwarts had gone all out on this event and it showed in the ice chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, sparkling like diamonds, and the walls, enchanted to look like great structures of blue ice with intricate designs curved into it which faded in and out with the changing light.

Professor McGonagall came strutting out of the hall with her head held precariously high as her victorian top-hat wobbled in its place, seeming to be only held aloft by an ugly assortment of crimson feathers and white pearls.

“Champions! Take your partners and form a line from here, please,” she positioned herself at the
centre of the double doors as they closed behind her. Amidst the shuffling into position, Harry and Ginny had somehow found themselves leading their little procession, much to their chagrin. “Potter, after the music begins, the doors will open and you will wait three counts before you start walking. All clear? Good.” She slipped back inside the hall.

“Whatever happens in there, Harry,” Ginny whispered as the first strains of music reached their ears, “don’t let me fall.”

The doors swung open at once and the four champions paraded themselves for the schools. Clapping and cheers greeted them as they stepped onto the space set up for dancing and took their positions. Immediately, the music changed and a woman’s smoky voice resonated in the room as she spoke of success and affairs of the heart.

“You know, you’re not half bad at this,” Ginny commented, following Harry’s steps.

“Trust me, it is not in my blood to become a dancer but at least now I can follow a simple tune,” he said.

Ginny laughed, “That’s all a girl could hope for, Harry. Hermione looks like she’s having a good time — though I can’t say the same for Ron.”

He followed her gaze to Ron, sitting on a chair next to a bored Padma and staring daggers at Hermione as she leaned close to hear Krum over the beat of the music, then threw her head back in laughter. Ron’s scowl deepened.

“He really can’t blame anyone but himself,” Harry twirled them around, “if he had asked her well enough, I think she would’ve said yes.”

“I’m kinda glad that he didn’t,” Ginny admitted, “you know how Ron is… I don’t think it would’ve ended well for either of them in the long run — he’s not like you.”

“Like me?” Harry looked at her quizzically.

“Let’s face it, Harry, it’s not like you’re the most mature boy out there but compared to Ron — and especially this year — you’re different,” Ginny finished, somewhat shyly.

“Good different or bad different?” asked Harry.

“Let’s see… we became friends, you basically brought me in on your inner circle, you saved my life once and now you’ve taken me to a dance that I couldn’t have gone to without you,” she paused, “I think we can say it’s a good different.”

They locked eyes and the air between them became heavy with something that Harry didn’t want to think about just yet.

A new song faded out of the old one and more couples started joining in from the sidelines. Professor Dumbledore took Professor McGonagall for a spin around the dance floor and passed by an oblivious Madame Maxime and Hagrid who were skirting the edges of the makeshift stage. A couple songs later and everyone returned to their seats — the champions taking their place at the high table — to enjoy the delicious feast that the house-elves had painstakingly prepared.

“Ginny!” Percy exclaimed from his seat. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at home with mum and dad. Third years aren’t invited to the ball.”

“Harry invited me, Percival,” Ginny said coolly. “The better question would be what you’re doing
here instead of Mr Crouch… I didn’t know your position required you to attend Hogwarts parties.”

“If you must know, I was recently promoted to Mr Crouch’s personal assistant,” Percy puffed out his chest loftily and looked down his nose at them. “I’m in charge of all sorts of important things now and this is just one of my many duties — to step in when Mr Crouch finds himself overwhelmed or otherwise indisposed. In fact, I was even made a go-between for Mr Crouch on matters of national security at the Ministry of Magic — the things you don’t know about could shock and awe your little mind, Ginny. We are making headway on the World Cup attack though, I can give you that much, and it’s because of great minds such as myself and Mr Crouch that you’re left to worry about nothing while we tackle the big problems in the world.”

“Tell me, Percy, does your esteemed Mr Crouch still call you Weatherby or was that just a temporary thing as you were off saving the world together one cauldron essay at a time?” Ginny asked innocently.

Harry choked on his stew and had to be thumped on the back by Krum before he could breathe again. He noticed that Ginny’s comment seemed to have shut up Percy for the time being and he only gave short answers to whatever Ludo Bagman was querying him about.

The courses of food kept coming and Ginny and Harry made up a game for themselves to pass the time. They challenged each other to find the most outrageously dressed individual in the room and then entertained themselves imagining what was going on through their heads when they picked that outfit. A particularly horrid men’s robe of cerulean blue, army green and violet nearly had them in stitches by dessert.

Once the last of the dishes magically sunk into the tables and vanished, the lights dimmed and a band began to set up in the far corner of the room.

“That’s the Weird Sisters!” Ginny cheered. She jumped up when the band finished preparing themselves and dragged Harry to the dance floor. It wasn’t long before they were joined by others and Harry could only smile as Ginny vibrated next to him in excitement and held his hand so tight, he was sure he’d end up losing it. Spontaneous amputation, they’d call it.

They danced together to every song in the Weird Sister’s new album and only let up to get a drink once the band took a brief break themselves.

“I’ll go get us something to drink, I think you need to talk to my brother over there before he does something stupid real soon,” Ginny pointed Harry in Ron’s direction and left for the drinks table with a brief squeeze to his hand.

“Hi,” Harry sat down.

“What do you think Hermione even sees in that blockhead?” Ron burst out. “I mean sure, he’s okay playing Quidditch but I can’t imagine he has much more to say other than that, especially not to Hermionniny,” mocked Ron.

“Straight to the point I see,” Harry answered. “I don’t know, Ron. He seems like a nice guy to me and being the one who’s competing against him, I’m the one who should be bothered by this.”

“Bothered with what?” Hermione’s breathless question broke in. She sat down on the chair across them and fanned herself. “Is it hot in here or is it just me?” she giggled.

Harry had never heard Hermione giggle before and, now that he looked at her closely, he’d never seen her this happy before either — she was practically glowing.
“Finished fraternizing with the enemy, have you? Shared any state secrets while you were out there dancing with Vicky?” Ron shot at her.

As much as he loved his friends, Harry took that as his cue to leave and discreetly vacated the table, leaving behind Hermione’s heated response to Ron’s accusation. He found Ginny at the drinks table, grabbing them each a Butterbeer.

“Oh there you are, I was just about to come over and join you three,” said Ginny.

“Yeah let’s not, Ron stuck his entire leg in his mouth and Hermione is dealing with him now,” Harry grimaced. “Do you want to head outside, get some fresh air?”

“Sure,” Ginny followed as Harry led the way to the gardens.

A cool breeze swept over them when they set foot outside, bringing with it what at first appeared to be hovering twinkling lights or fireflies but, once they got closer to the couple, it became clear that they were actually beautiful tiny faeries.

“You know,” Ginny started as they sat down on a corner bench surrounded by tall hedges, “I used to hate garden gnomes with a passion when I was young.”

“Really? What made you hate them?” asked Harry.

“Garden gnomes like to eat faeries,” Ginny explained, “and before they infested our home, we used to have faeries in the garden and they would sometimes fly up to my window at night… for a little girl who was told horror stories by her lovely brothers right before she went to sleep, having those faeries right outside her window was sort of great.” She laughed. “Then the garden gnomes ate a few and those that didn’t get eaten just left the Burrow. I know it’s kinda dumb to hate them for that but that’s how it is for me. You must think I’m such a child.”

“I’d never think that,” Harry cleared his throat. “You know some of what it was like growing up with the Dursleys for me… and I’m not going to go into any details — don’t want to ruin the mood,” he smiled jokingly, “— but I would’ve killed to have had those faeries outside my window at night.”

“I’m sorry your aunt and uncle were so horrible to you — you don’t deserve that,” Ginny huddled close to his side in comfort.

Harry had a mild moment of panic as she leaned heavily against his side. He could feel her body heat seeping through his clothes and could smell her hair from where her head rested on his arm. He hesitantly placed his arm around her in a loose hug and breathed a sigh of relief when she only snuggled closer.

They sat that way for Harry didn’t know how long, drinking their butterbeer and keeping close for warmth as faeries pranced around them and stars shone from above. They could hear faint notes of music coming from inside where the rest of the school was still celebrating. It wasn’t until Ginny started shivering that Harry began to think it was time to head back inside.

They were walking back to the castle through the maze of hedges when they reached another corner bench framed by ivy, only this time, the bench wasn’t empty. Sitting partially on top of each other, lips firmly glued together and suggestive noises coming from where they were attached, were Fleur and her beau, Roger Davies. As the kissing couple shifted position, Harry noticed one of Roger’s hands had found itself suspiciously lost in the inside of Fleur's dress and that’s when he decided to make a fast exit. He herded Ginny down the path they’d come from as silently as possible and it wasn’t until they were safely away from the amorous couple that he noticed Ginny's shoulders
shaking.

“Oh my god!” she burst out, peals of laughter rattling her frame. “Did we seriously just catch Fleur Delacour getting groped by little Roger Davies?” and she was overcome with giggles.

The deer in headlights sensation had left Harry after they’d escaped Fleur and her date so he allowed himself to join Ginny in on her mirth.

“Little Roger Davies?” he asked once they had calmed down. “He can’t be much younger than her… I suppose he might be a bit on the short side…” Harry mused.

“I wasn’t talking about his — uhm — height exactly…” she trailed off slyly.

“Then what were you — oh,” Harry was certain his cheeks had caught aflame. “And you… uh… you know this because you — and him…” he wasn’t sure, but Harry would bet that this was what it felt like to be kicked in the stomach by a Hippogriff.

“What? No! Of course not!” Harry felt somewhat mollified that her cheeks matched his own in colour now. “A girl in Ravenclaw dated him for a few weeks and then she talked to her friend in Hufflepuff who told her sister in Gryffindor and that just happens to be one of my roommates so she told me,” Ginny rushed to explain.

Fortunately for both of them, they were saved from further discussion when raised voices started to reach them, seeming to be coming from the other side of the hedge wall to their right. One of the voices hissed something to the other and both Harry and Ginny inched nearer and parted the bushes to get a closer look once they realized that Professor Snape was one of the two individuals on the other side.

“— but look! It has been becoming more and more clear… years since I saw it this dark… not since he was around…” the other man with Professor Snape was just out of sight. He was holding out his arm to the professor with the sleeve of his robe up to his elbow, exposing his forearm to the moonlight.

“He is dead,” Snape intoned. “Do you not think that if he were back then he would have made himself known to us by now?” he challenged.

“I know only what I feel Severus, and last time it was like this,” the other man thrust his arm onto Snape’s face, “was during the war. Do not play coy with me, Severus… You know what this means — what he will do to us once he’s returned.”

“Do to you, you mean, Igor,” — Ginny and Harry sported identical shocked expressions at the revelation of the other man’s identity — “Flee if you must, hide away in the tallest mountain in the world or burrow down in a cave in the deepest ocean… I am not leaving Hogwarts.”

A pregnant pause followed Snape’s declaration.

“You are a fool, Severus, if you think that you will not be punished for your disloyalty… he will make an example of you — just like he will of me, if he even allows me to live long enough for that to happen — mark my words.”

An outraged female shriek broke through the night and the two men stiffened and ceased their conversation. The two Gryffindors hiding in the bushes observed, breath held trapped in their lungs, as Karkaroff and Snape departed without another word, heading in separate directions.

“That was…” Ginny trailed off, lost for words.
“Interesting,” Harry supplied. “Very, very interesting.”
Chapter 18

It was days later and Harry was still haunted by the mystery enshrouding the conversation he’d overheard between Karkaroff and Snape. Neither him nor Ginny had had a chance to discuss it that night. As soon as they’d arrived back at the great hall, they had been swept away in their friends’ drama when Ron had grabbed onto Harry and led him away (presumably for the same reason that a tearful Hermione had dragged Ginny away). Ron and Hermione had yet to speak more than a curt few words to each other, making it one of the most awkward holidays Harry had ever been a part of, and that was saying something.

To make matters worse, Ginny was being kept busy by the few friends that had stayed at school during that winter and was therefore another person that he wished he could speak to but rarely got to see. They’d barely gotten a chance to so much as hold a short conversation the day after the Yule Ball and Harry didn’t know what to do with the feeling in his chest that insisted there were still some things that had been left unsaid.

A shiver coursing through his limbs urged Harry to poke at the warm embers of the common room fireplace and check the clock on the wall once more. Three to two in the morning.

He yawned.

Exactly three minutes later, the clock struck two and the mirror in his pocket began to heat up. He hurriedly brought it out and muttered the few words needed to answer the mirror call.

“Heya, pup,” Sirius grinned from the small glass piece, “long time, no see.”

Harry didn’t try to hold back his own smile. “Sirius,” he greeted him fondly, “how are things over there? Where’s Remus?”

“Things are going just fine over on this side. Remus is just out working at his latest job,” Sirius replied.

“Did they finally hire him as a private tutor then? That’s fantastic! Good for him,” said Harry.

“That’s what the job description says… from what he tells me it sounds more like the poor kid’s parents just didn’t know what to do with him anymore and stuck Remus on him as a glorified babysitter—it’s why he’s out so late right now, the parents had some event to go to and they stuck Remus with the kid,” Sirius grimaced. “He’s better though, Remus… he’s keeping busy with this new job and that seems to have helped.”

“What about you?” Harry knew well enough by now that Sirius would rarely—if ever—admit to having a hard time adjusting to living a normal life after twelve years imprisoned, but Harry also knew what it felt like to be pushed to talk about something no one had any business hearing about. He didn’t want to subject his godfather to that.

“As well as I can be,” Sirius paused. “Without Remus around all the time, it’s just me around this bloody old house… Alice pops in sometimes—says she likes to check in on us—but it’s not the same as when you were here, pup…”

“You’re a fugitive, Sirius,” Harry began hesitantly, “there’s no way to get around that, but you can’t trade in one prison for another.” Harry battled against the unease settling in his bones as he said, “You need to do something. You need to leave the house every once in awhile—I’m not asking you to be reckless and get caught, but you can’t rot away in that house… not when you just got out of
For a moment, neither man said a word, both too overwhelmed by the gravity of the moment to so much as consider a good way to respond. Sirius cleared his throat and used his sleeve to wipe down his face.

“You won’t be getting rid of me that easily, kiddo. I’m planning on being around long enough to teach the next generation of Potters how to be proper Marauders,” Sirius winked, “and tell a few embarrassing stories about their precious father of course. Now tell me, what’s this call about?”

“Something strange happened at the Yule Ball…” Harry told Sirius about his encounter with Snape and Karkaroff and their cryptic conversation, sparing no detail, and by the time he was done, Remus had returned and was listening intently.

“Do you remember which arm Karkaroff showed Snape? Was it the left or the right?” asked Remus.

“The left.”

“He must have been showing him the Mark then,” Remus spoke to Sirius, “they always had it on their left arm and we know Karkaroff was one of them…”

“One of who now?” asked Harry.

“Karkaroff was a Death Eater at around the same time as Snape,” Remus explained. “After the war ended, the Ministry started cracking down on every possible lead they had on who the Death Eaters were. A way to do that was through informants—”

“Just another word for a snitch,” Sirius cut in.

“—who were Death Eaters who’d made a deal with the Wizengamot—the more names they gave, the less time they spent in Azkaban.”

“If Voldemort is coming—and this just serves to prove that he is—then it’s no wonder Karkaroff is scared shitless,” said Sirius, “he didn’t make any friends when he turned on his own… and he’s certainly not going to receive much help from the government, not with Crouch still there.”

“Crouch? What does he have to do with anything?” Harry questioned.

“Crouch was a real hardball back then, he despised Death Eaters, everything that they stood for and everything that they did. Thing is, he was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time so he could actually do something about it and some say his ruthlessness matched the Death Eaters’ and I’m inclined to agree,” scowled Sirius. “It was his government that landed me in prison and I was innocent, so imagine how Karkaroff must feel.”

“If the Mark has made an appearance again then Karkaroff and Snape won’t be the only ones who’d have noticed,” said Remus grimly. “Voldemort was never lacking in supporters and the government certainly didn’t get all of them put away when he disappeared—he’ll return and the remains of his forces, those that aren’t dead or hiding, will be waiting for him.”

“And whatever he’s planning, you’re a part of it, Harry,” Sirius stressed. “This Tournament… you were never meant to be a part of it and yet, he’s not even at full power and managed to get you in this mess.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think he’s planning on killing me with the Tournament,” said Harry, “I can’t explain why, but I don’t think that’s what he’s thinking of—yet.”
“I don’t like it, pup,” Sirius insisted.

“Yeah, well, neither do I. All I can do now is hope to figure out the clue to the next task before it’s too late,” said Harry.

“Have you not been able to open the egg yet?” Remus asked.

“I have, that’s not the problem. I just don’t know what it’s trying to tell me or what it even is,” Harry pulled on the ends of his hair.

“Describe it to me,” Remus leaned forward.

“I don’t even know how to… it’s like this high pitched shrieking sound, only it doesn’t sound human, or even from an animal… it’s nothing I’ve ever heard of before. It doesn’t sound like pain or anger, it’s just really loud screeching—nails on a blackboard with wailing cats being put through a meat grinder,” Harry shuddered.

“That’s quite the image,” Remus rubbed his eyebrow as he thought. “I think what you’re describing is something I’ve never actually heard in person, but I’ve had a few former colleagues explain it to me—it’s Mermish.”

“What’s Mermish?” asked Harry.

“The language of the Merpeople. Fascinating creatures, they are, falling right in line with centaurs as both species refused to be placed under the status of being since neither group wished to be compared to Vampires, Hags and the like. They are incredibly sophisticated beasts, in fact, there’s a colony of Merpeople living in the Black Lake, if I’m not mistaken,” Remus lectured.

“So, if it does turn out to be Mermish, how do I figure out what the clue is saying? Would a translation spell work?” Harry shifted in his seat, anxious in making some headway with the golden egg.

“I would imagine so,” said Remus, “another way would be to listen to the language in the environment that it is meant to be spoken in—Mermish can only be understood by humans when spoken underwater, although you might run into trouble if the message is too long and you can’t hold your breath.”

“I’ll try to translate it first, and if that doesn’t work then I’ll figure out another way,” said Harry. He checked the time on the clock. “It’s getting late and I have potions first thing tomorrow morning. I can’t afford to be distracted during Snape’s class.”

“Alright pup,” Sirius yawned, “just know, if that greasy bastard tries to pull anything on you, give me a call, you hear me?”

“Sure,” said Harry.

“See you another time, cub,” Remus waved.

“Goodnight.”

The image on the mirror blanked out to his own reflection. Harry put the device away and stood up slowly, his back cracking as he straightened up and trudged up the stairs to his bed. As he put his glasses away and cocooned himself under the covers, he resolved to get started on cracking the egg and preparing for the next task tomorrow. He fell asleep to the image of Ariel from the Little Mermaid and her trusty fish friends dragging him down to the dark depths of the Black Lake.
“Of course!” Hermione exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that? It was right in front of our noses from the very beginning… I do miss Mr Lupin’s classes, and of course he would know the answer, he was the best teacher we’ve ever had. When do you want to try it, Harry?”

Hermione was so excited after hearing Remus’ advice that she was bouncing off the soles of her feet and holding her hands clasped together in front of her as though in prayer.

“I was thinking we could do it right now, before we head down to breakfast. That way, we have the day to think about it and then we can talk about it after dinner,” said Harry.

“What are we waiting for standing around here all day then?” Hermione asked. “Let’s grab Ron and get on with it. I just have a good feeling about this, Harry.”

The excitement of finally figuring out the pesky clue had grabbed such a firm hold on Hermione that she seemed to have forgotten her row with Ron. Harry found the youngest male Weasley still snoozing in bed and after waking him up and force-dressing him like a child, the three of them walked out of the tower to the closest empty classroom, the egg hidden underneath Harry’s robe.

After they had settled into the room, they locked the door to ensure they wouldn’t be disturbed and Hermione cast a simple spell to prevent any noise coming from within the room to reach anyone passing by.

Harry set the egg on a nearby desk and levelled his wand.

“Transferendum!” he cast and immediately the egg exulted a soft glow before dying off.

“Did it work?” Ron scratched the side of his nose.

“Only one way to find out,” Harry picked up the egg and twisted it open, bracing himself for the terrible screeching.

“Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you’re searching, ponder this:
We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,
An hour long you’ll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour—the prospect’s black,
Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back.”

Harry closed the egg up again.

“It worked,” Hermione grinned. “Open it up again so I can write down the words.”

They had to listen to the enchantingly melancholy song twice more before they could get all the words down on parchment.
“The beginning seems to line up with what Remus said about the Merpeople, but it’s the rest that we have to figure out now,” Hermione chewed on her lip.

“I reckon we can do that later,” said Ron, “breakfast is almost over, which means that class will start soon and Snape will not be happy if we’re late… or show up either, but it’ll be worse if we’re late.”

Harry chuckled. They dismantled the spells in the room and headed down to breakfast with barely a moment to spare and the rest of the day was a blur for the three Gryffindors as they were constantly side-tracked in class, trying not to think about the mysterious clue and failing.

Just as they had agreed, once dinner time came and went, Harry and Ron took a different turn to their classmates and steered themselves towards the empty classroom.

“Oi, where’s Hermione?” asked Ron. “I could’ve sworn she was right behind us as we walked up the stairs.”

“Maybe she went to the bathroom,” Harry shrugged just as the door to the room clicked open.

“I’m sorry we’re late,” Hermione huffed, ushering Ginny inside to place the necessary spells on the room.

“You brought Ginny?” exclaimed Ron. “Why did you have to bring my little sister along? We can handle this on our own, right Harry?”

“It can’t hurt to have more heads on this, can it, Ron?” said Harry.

Ron grunted and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Still, my sister?” but then pushed the matter out of his mind and got to work with the rest.

They spent an hour bouncing ideas against each other. They all agreed that Harry would have to go into the Black Lake to retrieve something stolen from him—only part that they disagreed on was what would be stolen.

“It could be anything,” said Ron. “Maybe we can make a list of all the things you care about and so when one of them goes missing, we’ll know what they took. Firebolt’s the first one, yeah?”

“Really Ron?” Ginny was unimpressed. “You think they’re going to steal his broomstick, hide it at the bottom of the lake with the Merpeople and have him go fetch it like some type of dog?”

“Hey! If I had a broom like that, you’re sure as hell I would go into the lake to save it,” Ron argued.

“Yeah but this is the Triwizard Tournament, Ron. They’re looking for something else—they can’t have their champions going into a task looking for their favourite book or their security blanket from when they were three years old,” Ginny scoffed, “no one would watch that.”

“You’re right,” Hermione realized, “no one would watch that! But they would watch their champions go in a quest to find someone instead of something.”

All activity stopped as they let that sink it.

“You think they’re going to put someone—down there—with the Merpeople… for an entire hour?” Ron looked green at the gills.

“They pitted teenagers against fully grown mother dragons,” Harry said dryly, “I don’t think putting some people in a lake with underwater beasts would be crossing a line for them.”
“…any idea on who it could be?” Hermione asked tentatively.

“It could be any one of you,” said Harry, “all it says is that it will be someone I will sorely miss. I’m always around you lot so I’m guessing it has to be one of you.”

“Blimey,” Ron shivered.

“And for the hour limit?” asked Ginny. “You don’t think that means something will happen if you don’t find them in an hour, right?”

At this, even Hermione appeared to be having a hard time holding it together.

“I don’t know…” Harry trailed off, “but they wouldn’t put anyone outside the Tournament in more harm than is safe. They wouldn’t want to risk having to disband the games again.”

“That’s right,” Hermione latched on, “whoever it is will be perfectly safe. The judges will see to that and that includes Professor Dumbledore. We should research what sort of creatures live in the lake then cross-reference that with spells, charms or curses that you can…”

Hermione continued to lay out their plan for the next several weeks while Harry tuned out for a moment to stare down at his hands, hanging clasped between his legs. Logically, he had known that the Tournament wouldn’t be easy (bringing out a dragon for the first task had proven that) but he hadn’t thought that it would take this much out of him. He felt like he was already submerged in the lake, trying with all his might to kick out under him and keep his head above water as hands tipped with claws kept pulling and scratching at him, threatening to pull him under.

His hands were suddenly encompassed in warmth. He glanced up to Ginny searching his face in concern, her eyes flitting between his own as she offered him a reassuring squeeze. He squeezed back and attempted a smile but she only rolled her eyes at him and levelled him with a glance that spoke of Mrs Weasley and said, “Don’t play me for a fool, Harry Potter, I know you’re not fine so don’t pretend otherwise.”

“—is it really that late already?” asked Hermione. “We should all get going before Filch finds an excuse to string us up from our thumbs.”

Ron snorted, “Like he needs an excuse for that.”

“Here, Hermione, you two take the cloak back and we’ll take the map,” Harry handed her his Invisibility Cloak and motioned for her and Ron to get moving.

As the door closed behind their invisible forms, Harry turned back to Ginny at the same time that she stood up from her chair to face him. Caught mere centimetres away from each other, their breaths hitched in surprise and something jittery that made their skin tingle and their breaths catch in their throats.

This close, Ginny noticed, for the first time, the grey flecks in Harry’s green eyes, a ring of amber which surrounded his pupil and called to her like a siren song. She could feel her heart racing as her chest heaved in what? Fear, excitement, embarrassment… she couldn’t tell, he was looking at her so intensely.

For his part, Harry felt himself entranced by the many freckles dotting the bridge of Ginny’s nose and spreading across the apples of her cheeks. It was a trait shared by every Weasley that he had met and yet, on Ginny, it appeared new to him, unique in the sense that it made her who she was and highlighted her chocolate brown eyes all the more. Unbeknownst to Harry, his gaze had slipped lower, to her lips, and he continued staring until a hooting owl from outside broke through to his
senses.

“We should—”

Ginny rose up on the tips of her toes and pressed her lips to his in a kiss, putting a stop to any thinking on Harry’s part. Her lips were soft, warm, and the kiss was unlike any other Harry had had before. It was longer than his first kiss with a girl from his grade school that had shyly told him she liked his glasses and planted a peck on his lips before scurrying off to her friends. He’d only kissed two other girls since that first time—once because she had been dared to by her friends and the other had been his girlfriend for all of two weeks before Dudley had scared her off—but this felt different.

Too scared to move anything other than his mouth, Harry kept his arms awkwardly glued to his sides and moved his lips slightly, prolonging the kiss for a few seconds before they both pulled away.

“In case that didn’t make it clear,” Ginny almost whispered, “I kinda like you, Harry.”

They both laughed at that and, the tension broken, Harry gathered his courage to say, “I kinda like you too, Ginny.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ginny grinned.

Neither felt the need to say anything else. The walk back to their common room was uneventful, the map kept them apprised of any possible surprises headed their way and they carefully avoided them. The Gryffindor common room was empty when they entered through the portrait hole, Harry figured that Ron and Hermione had gotten tired of waiting and gone to bed.

Harry caught Ginny’s eye and they both hastily looked away only to sneak glances at each other sporadically. They let out nervous chuckles which quickly erupted into laughter as the ridiculousness of their situation caught up to them.

“Goodnight, Gin,” Harry ducked down to press a soft kiss on her cheek.

Ginny lowered her head, a smile threatening to overwhelm her, “Goodnight, Harry.”

-The-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

The high from having kissed Ginny stayed with him well into the night, through his meditative practice, deep in sleep and blanketing him as he woke up early the next morning. It was as he was buttering his toast during breakfast that his good mood was shattered with the arrival of Hedwig and her morning parcel.

“Hello, girl,” he carded his fingers through her feathers, “you got something for me?”

She hooted and held out her leg where the Daily Prophet was hanging from a cord. Harry untied the newspaper and allowed Hermione to feed the loyal owl as he perused the news. The headline immediately caught his attention:

Dumbledore’s Half-Giant Mistake

Harry’s stomach took a nosedive as he continued to read Rita Skeeter’s article depicting Hagrid in the worst light possible whilst tearing down Dumbledore’s credibility and judgement. A commotion from the head table caught his attention and he lifted his head just in time to see Hagrid’s hunched over form stumble out through the side door used by faculty he was quickly followed by Professors Flitwick and Sprout, who rushed after the denounced half-giant man.
“What’s going on?” Ron asked as several sets of eyes around the hall kept stealing glances toward the open door and whispering amongst each other.

Hermione thrust her own copy of the newspaper at Ron and ordered, “Read.”

Whilst Ron was getting caught up, Neville sat down next to him and began reading the same article as Harry continued leafing through the paper until something else caught his attention, something that seemed to have been almost hidden on the last page of the obituaries section.

**Bertha Jorkins,**

*Ministry Employee for the Department of*

*Magical Games and Sports,*

*Found Dead in Albanian Forest*

The article was short and to the point, it outlined the reasons for her trip to Albania, her brief return weeks later and her out of character behaviour, then her sudden disappearance and the ongoing search for her person until officials found her body two days ago. Harry read the paragraph detailing the cause of her death—poisonous snake bites covering her entire body—and gave a shudder as he had a sudden thought. One that would place Ms Jorkins right in the middle of his entering the Tournament.

“Who the fuck does she think she is!” Ron’s angry cry rang out. “Digging her fake nails where they don’t belong and writing this garbage about Hagrid. First, she goes after Harry because of the stupid Tournament and now she’s trying to get Hagrid sacked.”

“Where did she even get this information from?” asked Hermione. “Hagrid wouldn’t be stupid enough to say something like this to her and neither would any of the teachers—”

“Doubt Snape would mind,” Neville muttered.

“—so how did she come up with it?” Hermione finished.

“I don’t know how she did it but the point is that something like this could ruin Hagrid forever,” Ron said. “No one takes kindly to giants—they’re violent creatures with more muscle than brains—so imagine if someone like Malfoy’s parents heard about this.”

Ron let his statement hang for a moment.

“Dumbledore would have no choice but to fire him if Malfoy went to the Board,” Harry said. “Especially if it’s true.”

“I always thought Hagrid had gotten into some sort of accident—he fell into a Skele-Grow potion or something. This actually explains a lot,” mused Neville, “especially why he keeps insisting that all those beasts he shows us are just big and misunderstood.”

Hermione frowned sadly, she thought of all the times Hagrid had brought a new creature to introduce them to and made sure they knew what to watch out for, how to take care of them and, most important of all, what it was like to live amongst them. Was that how Hagrid felt all this time?

“I actually found something else that might be important,” Harry hesitated, “but I’m not sure… I could be wrong.”
He explained the article on Bertha Jorkins and his theory as to the reasons for her demise.

“It would explain how your name got in the Goblet,” said Hermione. “If someone had confunded or even imperiused her then she would have no choice but to do whatever they wanted to the Goblet while it was in Ministry custody. That must be how your name was allowed to be placed in the cup — there was already a loophole in the spellwork.”

“The way that she died… It said that she was bitten by a poisonous snake, not once, but many times all over her body… Almost as if someone wanted to see her suffer… Enjoyed it even,” Harry frowned.

“What are you thinking, mate?” asked Ron.

“I think this is what Voldemort,” his friends winced, “was talking about in my dream. And he had a snake. He called it Nagini.”

An uncomfortable silence weighed heavy on them as they processed the possible consequences for everyone in the wizarding world and beyond if this turned out to be true.

“You’ve long since suspected that he had something to do with you being in the Tournament, and it makes sense now,” Hermione continued uncertainly, “so what should we do?”

“We should tell Dumbledore is what we should do,” said Neville, “he needs to know what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter who we tell or don’t,” said Harry, “the damage is done and Voldemort got what he wanted. I’m in the Tournament and knowing how I got here won’t change anything.”

“Someone still put your name in there though,” Ron insisted.

“We knew that already,” Hermione muttered. “Harry’s right, this doesn’t help us figure out who, in this castle, put his name in the Goblet.”

“My money’s on Malfoy,” grunted Ron.

“He’s just a teenager like us, Ron,” Hermione argued.

“So is Harry and he’s already met You-Know-Who three times so far. Who’s to say Malfoy’s Death Eater parents aren’t offering crumpets and tea to him right now?” said Ron.

Struck by the truth in his words, they each chanced a glance at the Slytherin table where Malfoy was sniffing questioningly at his drink as he fended off Pansy Parkinson’s grabby hands.

“What are you all staring at?” Ginny’s teasing question brought them all snapping to attention.

She sat down next to her brother, opposite Harry, and leaned forward against the table, eyes scrutinizing their stiff postures and shifty eyes.

“What’s going on? Harry?” she searched his face for clues.

As much as Harry was loathe to ruin her good mood, especially after last night, he told her what they’d come up with in jilted whispers and wary flashes to those around them.

“He’s really coming back then,” Ginny whispered. “Tom’s coming back.”

She was pale as a ghost, her skin looked sickly and her mouth was pursed so tightly that Harry was
afraid she’d bite through her lip. Her gaze was unseeing, likely recalling the events of her first year.

“Gin… Gin, look at me,” she looked up, hands trembling before him as he grabbed a hold of both of them in his. “If you think I’m going to let that evil bastard anywhere near you again then you’ve got another thing coming. I promise I’m going to stop him if it’s the last thing I do.”

His speech seemed to have calmed Ginny down. She didn’t let go of his hand, instead intertwining their fingers together and squeezing for dear life as she used her other hand to palm her face and card through her hair.

“I know you will, Harry,” she offered him a sad smile that was heavy with some type of meaning that he didn’t quite understand.

The school clock chimed, signaling the time for breakfast to be over. Taking a last bite, they all picked up their things and went to their separate classes with promises that they would meet that night to start helping Harry train for the next task.

This same routine became the norm during the last few weeks of January and veering towards the beginning of February. The five Gryffindors studied during the day, ate their meals, then met up together to come up with new strategies and ideas for the type of magic that could be useful to Harry.

It had been Hermione’s idea to turn his feet into flippers so that he could swim faster in the one hour limit. To complete the look, Neville had casually mentioned the time that his grandmother had used the Bubble-Head Charm on herself and her grandson when one of the rare magical plants in Neville’s greenhouse had sprouted the most foul smelling of flowers in the world, and that is how they came up with an idea on how to send Harry into the second task.

They had researched the Black Lake extensively and had compiled a list of all the creatures and plants living in the body of water. From there, they had combed through the books in the Hogwarts library for spells, curses and jinxes that would protect Harry from any unforeseen attack. At Ginny’s urging, and against Hermione’s wishes, they had also invested some of that time to acquiring a handful of useful spells that would work against Merpeople. Hermione had been affronted at thinking that they were planning on sending Harry into the Merpeople’s home with an arsenal of weapons against them, but she had finally conceded to Ginny’s suggestion when she’d argued:

“Anything can happen down there, Hermione. I’m not saying that we want Harry to be attacked by Merpeople or that they’re just going to attack him for no reason, but we don’t know what type of deal the judges have made with them. And just think, getting past a Merperson could actually be part of the task.”

After that, Hermione had grudgingly seen the logic to Ginny’s argument and had dedicated herself fully to the assignment (with the occasional grumble on interspecies cooperation that the others chose to overlook).

Friday 13th started off just like any other day in the month of February. Harry and his roommates woke up, got dressed and stumbled down the stairs to the great hall, still half asleep and yet somehow revived by the smell of warm food.

However, on this day, the path to the great hall was bathed in something that Harry had seen many times before and yet, had never thought to pay attention to thus far: Valentine’s Day decorations. Garlands lined with little pink and red hearts hung several metres down from the ceiling, head-sized balloon hearts floated behind house-elves dressed as cupids and the armoured soldiers lining the walls all had their swords, spears and shields pressed up against their chests—where their hearts would’ve been—as the area glowed a deep, bright red when someone passed by.
Harry wasn’t sure, but he’d hazard a guess that this was taken directly from his worst nightmare and from the scandalized looks on Ron, Neville, Dean and Seamus’ faces, he’d say that he wasn’t the only one to think that. The inside of the great hall was worse, if anybody could believe it. The house banners hadn’t been defiled, to Harry’s relief, but they were the only point of comfort as everything else had been bathed in various shades of pink and red.

“This isn’t real,” Ron complained as they sat down with Hermione and Ginny, “who could possibly like all this crap thrown in their face? It’s like a unicorn and a fairy had a child, which then threw up in here and that’s that.”

“I can’t say I’m very fond of it either,” Hermione wiped away some confetti that a dressed up cupid had dropped on her muffin.

“It’s never been this… grand before,” said Neville, “I think this Tournament has messed around with the teachers’ heads and now they think they have to prove something to the other schools—like with the Yule Ball.”

“Viktor told me that even without all these decorations, Hogwarts is still a lot more comfortable than Durmstrang ever was. He says he likes it here a lot more since it’s warm inside and it doesn’t get too cold that he can’t play Quidditch,” said Hermione.

“You’ve gotten real chummy with Vicky there, haven’t you? What’s next—is he going to ask you to Hogsmeade for Valentine’s Day?” Ron asked spitefully.

Hermione huffed. “Please don’t call him Vicky, you know that’s not his name. And yes, he has asked me to go to Hogsmeade with him for Valentine’s day.”

“I suppose he was disappointed when you told him no,” said Ron.

“Actually, I told him I’d love to go with him,” retorted Hermione.

Ron looked about ready to snap the table in half at Hermione’s answer, he was holding his knife in a white-knuckled grip and was grinding his teeth together. Hermione feigned being unaffected by his tone, but the meticulous manner in which she was cutting her apple into perfect little cubes told Harry a different story.

They ate their meal in silence after that, offering only a few random greetings to friends who passed them by on their way to wherever they needed to go. The tension filled lull in conversation allowed Harry the time to think about what he would like to do for Valentine’s day.

Things with Ginny had been going really well since their first kiss. Seemingly by mutual agreement they’d kept the progression of their friendship into something more completely to themselves. It wasn’t that they wanted to keep it a secret from everyone else—they weren’t ashamed—but rather they both realized that, in revealing that they had crossed that line, their absence from group events, their study sessions at the library and any whispered conversation or shared joke would become multi-layered.

On top of being a Hogwarts champion, he was also Harry Potter, and any type of action on his part would be met with a scrutiny that neither of them were comfortable with, but that they would have to learn to accept—especially once Harry asked Ginny to go to Hogsmeade with him.

As they were walking out of the hall with Hermione, Ron and Neville, keeping a careful five metre distance between each other, Harry took his chance and discreetly pulled Ginny aside.

“Hey listen, Gin, I was wondering if you’d like to go to Hogsmeade with me tomorrow? For
Valentine’s day,” he rushed out.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” Ginny grinned.

“Yeah, I-I guess I am,” said Harry.

“Then I accept,” Ginny quipped. “We can meet by the school gate after lunch tomorrow since I’m going to spend the morning with Luna.”

“What’s taking you guys so long?” Ron called out from down the hall. “Come on, Harry, or we’ll be late.”

“Be right there, Ron,” Harry yelled back. “See you later, Gin.”

“See you, Harry,” Ginny leaned towards him and Harry thought, for a happy second, that she was leaning in for a kiss but she only braced her hands on his chest and pushed off on her way to Charms class, wicked little smile in place.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

“There,” Remus grunted, “I think that’s all of them. Check the drapes again to make sure—I’ll just stand over here, keeping guard and whatnot.”

Sirius snorted. “Coward. You just don’t want to get bitten again. Did little Moony get an owie?”

“Little Padfoot will get a kick in the groin soon if he doesn’t know what’s good for him,” Remus retorted.

“Well, why don’t you just lick my—”

“Enough, you two!” Alice snapped. “Stop bickering like little children and get your wands ready.”

The two Marauders shared one last glare before they held out their wands steadily in front of themselves, poised and ready to strike at any second.

“Sorry, Ali,” said Sirius, grinning when Alice scowled at the nickname.

“On my mark,” said Alice, “One… Two… Now!”

Three jets of red left their wands and met the fabric of the curtain they were standing in front of. Almost immediately, a handful of petrified doxies fell onto the ground with a resounding thump, followed by clouds of dust.

“I think that’s all of them,” coughed Sirius. “Pass me the bag, Moony, we’ll keep them in there for now and get rid of it later.”

“Did you put the Impenetrable Charm I—” began Alice.

“Yes, I remembered,” Sirius interrupted her.

“And what about the—”

“Unbreakable Charm?” asked Sirius. “Second thing I did when you handed me the bag three hours ago.”

“Then I assume you also—”
“Made the inside of the bag immune to the doxies’ venom and painstakingly wrote—by hand, mind you—the label you wanted me to stick to the bag so that others at the trash site would know what they’re disposing of? Yeah, all done.” Sirius grinned at Alice’s annoyed pout.

“You don’t have to be an ass about it, Black,” said Alice.

“And you, dear Ali, don’t have to be such a nag about everything,” Sirius retorted.

“Oh yeah?” Alice challenged him. “Well I’m sorry if I don’t want a repeat of what happened last time. Tell me, Remus,” —Alice whirled around on the poor werewolf who was busy minding his own business in the corner of the room— “how many doses of serum did you have to take before the bite burn from those escaped doxies could die down?”

“One time!” Sirius exclaimed. “I forget the charm one time and now, I’m never gonna live it down.”

Stealthily backing out of the room, Remus only allowed himself a small, last minute peek at the still fighting couple before high-tailing it out of the room. He knew enough about their little game by now that if he hadn’t left when he did, then he would’ve been present, not for the first time, no, but for the second time, as they forgot about his presence and instead of fists flying, it was clothes.

Remus chuckled. It was good to see some of the life being restored to his good friend once more. It had been too long since he’d heard Sirius truly laugh and even longer since he’d seen that flirtatious spark in his eye that said he’d finally met someone who might be able keep up with him.

The kitchen of Grimmauld Place was, by leaps and bounds, the most habitable and welcoming room in the entirety of the Black family home and that was where Remus found himself once he’d descended the stairs. Stuck to the right wall of the kitchen was a floor plan of the house with several rooms crossed out in red. Remus added one more marking to the plan—the second dining room on the top floor—and counted five more rooms that had to be banished of Dark creatures, rid of Dark artifacts and cleaned of plain old dust before it could be sold.

It was a good decision on Sirius’ part—Remus reflected as he made himself a cup of tea—to finally sell the house that he detested with all his heart and soul, the only other place that could rival Azkaban with its bad memories and desolate interior. It was a step forward in the right direction in Remus’ opinion; it showed that Sirius was moving on with his life, making healthy choices and thinking of the future.

Remus chose to ignore what it said about him that in the past fourteen years he’d never had a steady job, jumped from one shoddy apartment to the next and had not been in a relationship since his Hogwarts years.

‘Heck,’ thought Remus, ‘Sirius has spent the last twelve years in Azkaban, is now a fugitive, and he still has more luck with women than I ever will.’

Fortunately for Remus at least, he wasn’t without a job for the time being. It didn’t come up to par with that one year that he’d taught at Hogwarts, but the pay was better than he could’ve hoped for and he’d dealt with worse hands from fate in the past.

“Cheers, Moony,” Sirius came bouncing in the kitchen, hair in a wild disarray and clothes wrinkled. “Wouldn’t happen to have gotten started on dinner, would you? No matter, I’ll try my hand at it.”

“Actually, I think there are some leftovers in the—”

“Remus! I didn’t know you’d be down here,” Alice hastily straightened out her wrongly buttoned blouse as she walked through the door, “Sirius said you’d probably gone to the lab to check on some
“Not for another hour, Alice,” said Remus. “Are you all right, dear? You’re looking a bit flushed,” Remus smirked from behind his cup of tea.

Alice’s light blush exploded into fire engine red. “No no, there’s no need to worry, Remus… Must have been all that exercise from cleaning out the dining room.”

“Yes, that was some vigorous exercise wouldn’t you say, Sirius?” asked Remus with faux innocence.

Sirius grinned. “I don’t know, Remus. Been a long time since I had a good workout but I’d say this was as good a one as any. Say, how long has it been for you again? You know, since your last workout?”

Remus glared at his longtime friend. “I can’t recall to be honest, but I’m not surprised you found it so taxing—bit out of practice, are we, Padfoot? Maybe lost a bit of endurance?”

“What!” Sirius squawked. “Now, see here, you—”

“Really, you two?” Alice harrumphed. “Must it always be like this every time?”

“Ali-love, you can’t blame two old friends making up for lost time. I can’t tell you how often we’d take the piss out of James when he was obsessed with Lily, and then even more when they finally got together. It’s just how we show our love,” said Sirius. “Besides, it really has been a long time for little Moony here and I think he could use some pointers on how to—”

“Me?” exclaimed Remus. “You’re the one that’s been living in a literal rock for the past decade—”

“I’m going to head back to my apartment now,” Alice announced, summoning her things from another room. “I’d say I won’t be back until you both grow up into the adults you’re supposed to be, but I think we both know even witches can’t live that long,” she teased them. “I’ll be back after work on Friday to help with the painting.”

After a peck on the lips to Sirius and a hug goodbye to Remus, Alice was out door and on her way to a secluded spot in the park outside the house where she could apparate to her home.

“You know,” Remus said after they’d finished the leftovers for dinner, “a woman like that—willing to put up and be with you when you’re a fugitive—well, I don’t know much, but that sounds like a keeper to me.”

“We’ve only known each other for a little over half a year,” argued Sirius. “Besides, she doesn’t know what she’s getting into. Not really. She’ll get bored of this,” —he waved a hand around— “soon and want to leave. I wouldn’t blame her either.”

“This won’t be forever,” said Remus, “you’ll sell the house whichever way you think you can, being on the run as you are, and then you can get Harry and finally move him back to—”

“It’s not the same and you know it,” Sirius grew agitated and got out of his seat to start pacing the room. “I’m just trading one prison for another. Granted, a much nicer one where I can live with my godson, but I won’t be able to go out on the street without some sort of Disillusionment Charm or as Padfoot or with a Polyjuice Potion in my stomach… I won’t be free,” Sirius slumped on the chair, looking defeated.

“Like I said, it won’t be forever,” Remus insisted as he patted him on the back in comfort.
“Maybe not,” Sirius relented, “I just hope I’ll be around to see it happen.”

As he watched his childhood friend battle with his inner demons on the kitchen table of his hated family home, Remus couldn’t help but think that they had a lot of work ahead of them if they had any hope of piecing themselves back together again.

---

“Harry, I know it’s Valentine’s Day and everything, but I wouldn’t be caught dead going in there and I really didn’t picture you as the type to enjoy drinking tea in fine china and feeding each other portions of,” —Ginny squinted at the Valentine’s offer written on the shop window— “*passion filled lava cake sprinkled with love.*”

Harry grimaced. “I’m sorry, Gin. I honestly had no clue it was going to be like this. All I heard was Lavender talking to Parvati about how Cedric Diggory was going to take his girlfriend here and how romantic it was and I just… I never pictured something like this,” he said, defeated.

Ginny giggled. “I appreciate the gesture, Harry, I really do but… this isn’t us, you know? Maybe it works for Parvati and Lavender but I’m not interested in the same things they are—and I hope you aren’t either,” she teased him.

“You know I’d rather face a thousand Hungarian Horntails—all at once—if it meant I wouldn’t have to spend my afternoon in there,” answered Harry, placing an arm around Ginny’s waist and guiding her away from the offending pink display that was Madam Pudifoot’s Tea Shop.

“You’ve never been in there before then, huh? Where did the great Harry Potter take his dates to on Valentine’s day then?” asked Ginny innocently.

“Why, Ms Weasley,” sang Harry, “is this your not-so-subtle way of asking me if I’ve been on dates before?”

“We might go to the same school, but you’re already a full year of Hogsmeade visits ahead of me. I was just wondering is all,” she avoided his amused stare by keeping a careful eye on the snow ridden path they were trudging through.

“If you must know, I’ve never been on a date before,” Harry admitted.

“Really?” pounced Ginny. She seemed to regret her eagerness as she quickly composed herself and said, “I mean, I figured what with you being who you are that girls would be clamouring over themselves trying to get a date.”

“Maybe now with all this Tournament business,” said Harry, “but I think they’d gotten used to it before and now it’s… like my first year all over again,” he frowned. “What about you? Any past conquests I should worry about?”

Ginny laughed. “No, there were a few boys, but nothing like that—nothing serious. Mum would hate it if I’d dated before, say I was too young, and she’d still hate it now too but I think it might help if she knows it’s you.”

“Your brothers might not be so happy about it,” Harry said as he tightened his grip on Ginny’s waist when a particular patch of ice caught her by surprise.

“I’ll deal with my brothers,” Ginny firmly stated.

“And I’ll stand by the sidelines cheering you on, done deal,” Harry grinned.
A wave of warm air greeted them as they pushed open the door to The Three Broomsticks, shook the snow from their coats and boots and found a small table pushed up against a window. They had just sat down on their seats when Madam Rosmerta came bustling over to greet them.

“Welcome, dearies, and happy Valentine’s day! What can I get the happy couple?” she asked.

Harry and Ginny looked sheepishly at each other when she called them a couple and suppressed their equally pleased smirks.

“I’ll have a Butterbeer and the day’s special,” said Harry.

“The same for me,” added Ginny.

“Excellent!” Madam Rosmerta waved her wand and two bottles of butterbeer zoomed to their table from behind the bar. “Your meals will be ready shortly.”

Both teens thanked the woman and waited until she’d left their table before their conversation resumed. Their meals came as they were in the middle of discussing their most embarrassing memory to date and they continued talking as they enjoyed the hot food.

“Harry, look!” Ginny pointed out the window to a couple of what looked like Hogwarts students walking out of Honeydukes. “I think that’s Hermione and Krum.”

Harry squinted and wiped the condensation from the glass. “I think you’re right,” he said, “I hope for all of our sakes that Ron is true to his word and stayed behind at the castle. I don’t think he’d want to see this,” Harry said, watching Krum tuck a lock of hair behind Hermione’s ear.

“It’s his own damn fault. He should’ve just asked her before like any normal bloke and not waited until practically the last minute,” declared Ginny.

“You know Ron, he’d rather hit himself over the head with a cauldron than admit he fancies a girl, never mind fancying Hermione,” said Harry. “Unlike myself, Ron hasn’t realized yet that the best catch he’s ever going to get is sitting right in front of him.”

"Is that what you think, now? You caught me?" Ginny asked incredulously. "I seem to recall, Potter, playing the longest game of 'will he notice me, will he not?' with a certain raven haired, green eyed bloke who just never caught a clue."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it most certainly is."

"Well then, I suppose you caught your fish now, haven't you?" Harry smiled as he captured Ginny's hand in his.

"I suppose I have," Ginny flirted back.

"Tell me, what are you gonna do now that you've caught me in your trap?" asked Harry.

"I suppose I'll have to kiss you just to stop you asking silly questions like that," she said.

Their lips met halfway across their small table, their grins in place preventing them from deepening the kiss further than a close-mouthed caress. After they’d separated from each other, something in the corner of his vision caught Harry’s attention. Sitting nestled in a corner booth with Cormac McLaggen was Lavender, staring wide-eyed at him and Ginny. When she caught him looking right
back, she hastily dropped her gaze and began whispering to her date.

“I think we’ve been caught red-handed,” Harry murmured, gesturing in Lavender’s direction with a shake of his head.

Ginny spared the other Gryffindor girl a peek before shrugging and saying, “It was bound to happen sooner or later. I just hope the gossip mill doesn’t start churning and reach my brother before we do.”

“You think he’ll take it badly?” asked Harry.

“I’d really like for my brother to surprise the us all and be okay with us seeing each other, but he hasn’t exactly been on his best behaviour lately,” Ginny noted.

“Hogsmeade visit isn’t done until six and it’s,” —Harry checked the clock on the wall— “half past four, which means we have plenty of time to take a walk around before we have to start heading back if we want to beat word of mouth getting to Ron before we do.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They paid for their meal and left the pub to start walking down the streets of the village. They peered into the windows of the shops they passed by and sometimes even ducked in and pretended to be interested in the merchandise when they could not longer stand the cold outside.

It was on such an occasion that they ran into none other than Ron and Neville perusing the aisles of Zonko’s Joke Shop. Neville had been peering through the eye of a Karameloscope when he’d spotted Ginny and Harry on the other side of his candy device. He’d waved them over and nudged Ron all in one go before either Harry or Ginny could even think of making a quick escape.

“Harry! Ginny! I didn’t know you guys were out here,” said Neville.

“We decided to come together since Ron didn’t feel like going out and Hermione—” Harry hesitated for too long, “—well, she already had other plans.”

“With Krum,” Ron said venomously. “I don’t know what she sees in that blockhead. Must be boring as hell to only be able to talk about Quidditch and Bulgaria.”

“I’m sure that’s not all they—” Ginny cut herself off after receiving a sharp glare from her brother.

“So,” Neville dragged out nervously as they started walking out of the shop, “we were just about to head to the Three Broomsticks if you wanted to join us.”

“Actually, we were already there for lunch and were just about to—”

“Come on, Ginny,” Ron interrupted her. “I’ve hardly seen Harry all day and I’m sure he’d like to take a break and hang out with his guy friends for a while. I’m pretty sure I saw Luna by Gladrags on our way over here so you can go hang out with her while we take Harry with us.”

By the end of Ron’s proposed plan Ginny was fuming inside; Harry knew if he didn’t do something soon, his girlfriend would explode against her brother and, though she probably didn’t feel like it at the moment, it would not be a good idea to put him in a bad mood before they broke their news to him.

He had already stepped forward to diffuse the situation when the last person he wanted to see stepped out from an alleyway, caught them in his crosshairs, and sauntered right on over with his two trademark bodyguards trailing behind him.
“Weasel. Weaslette. Brainless. Scarhead,” Draco nodded to each of them in turn. “I’m surprised to find you all here, I’ve always doubted Brainless here had the ability to remember how to get to Hogsmeade and back and I can’t for the life of me figure out what two penniless Weasels are doing in Honeydukes of all places,” Draco taunted them.

“Lay off, Malfoy. Don’t you have some second years whose candy you forgot to steal?” said Ron.

“Please, Weasel, unlike you, I can afford to buy my own treats and don’t have to resort to petty thievery,” Draco smirked.

Ron was fuming, his face was steadily growing darker as he squeezed his fists at his sides.

“At least we don’t have to pick on anyone else to feel better about ourselves,” Neville spoke up.

“What happened, Malfoy? Daddy doesn’t give you enough attention at home?” said Ginny.

Draco glared at her. “Watch what you say about my father, you blood-traitor.”

“Oh! Watch it!” Harry growled, stepping between Ginny and Draco. “Don’t you talk to her that way, Malfoy.”

“Or what, Potter? Are you going to defend your little girlfriend’s honour and challenge me to a duel like the good little champion you are?” Draco sneered. “I’ll say this much about your little… pet… I never thought she had it in her. I saw you two earlier in the Three Broomsticks, you know. Goes to show what some people would do for a few Sickles, eh?”

Before Draco could react, Harry was onto him, fists grasping the boy’s collar as he shoved him against the wall. Behind him, he thought he heard Ginny, Neville and Ron pull out their wands and point them at Crabbe and Goyle.

“Now listen here, you ferret,” Harry hissed, “I better not catch you saying anything like that to Ginny ever again or I swear to you, Moody will be the least of your problems because guess what? I won’t have to hold back like he did. I’ll transfigure you into the rat that you are and throw you in the Forbidden Forest for the Acromantulas to feast on.”

Although looking more pale than usual, Draco brought his face closer to Harry’s and jeered, “Bring it, Potter.”

Harry’s grip tightened on Draco’s robe and just as he had decided to throw all caution to the wind and wipe that vile smirk off his face, he started hearing whispers and murmurs. Checking around himself, he saw that his group of friends and the three Slytherins had gathered an audience. It wouldn’t be long now before a professor passing by heard about the commotion and came to have a look.

Ginny must have been thinking along the same lines, for she said reluctantly, “He’s not worth it, Harry. No good can come out of this right now. Just leave it.”

“Listen to your girlfriend, Potter. Run along,” mocked Draco.

In spite of wanting nothing more than to keep true to his threat, Harry’s next course of action was decided for him once he caught sight of two tall, and one extremely short, robed figures coming around the corner of the long street. He forcefully shoved Draco against the wall and turned around without saying another word, grabbing onto Ginny’s hand and taking quick strides to escape Draco’s last shouted taunts.
Harry led Ginny, Neville and Ron to the ridge overlooking the Shrieking Shack. He stood there, stoic and bracing himself against the wooden railing as his heart calmed down and his vision cleared from the all out rage he’d just experienced. He felt Ginny’s gloved hand rubbing circles against his back and gathered comfort from her touch.

“Would either one of you like to tell me what the hell Malfoy was on about?” Ron broke the silence.

“Ron, I really don’t think this is the time to—” began Neville, trying to quell Ron’s anger.

“No! No, Neville. This my sister, we’re talking about—my baby sister! With my best mate!” Ron was panting. “My little sister and my best mate doing Merlin knows what behind my back! How long has this been going on, huh?”

“Ron, calm down,” implored Ginny. “You’re making this out to be way bigger than it actually is.”

“Me? I’m doing that? I should calm down? Maybe I’ll calm down when you finally tell me what’s going on.” Ginny opened her mouth to answer but Ron cut her off. “No, I want to hear it from Harry. Well?”

Harry finally turned around to face his friends. “Come on, Ron, let’s take a walk,” he said.

“Wha—Harry, you owe me some answers after what—” said Ron.

“Come on then, I’ll explain everything on the way back to the castle. You can clobber me all you want afterwards if you still feel like it and no one will be around to stop you,” said Harry.

“Fine,” Ron relented. He stomped off without another word.

“I’m sorry our date was ruined,” Harry told Ginny.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, “I was having a grand time until Ferretface came along.”

Harry smiled. “I’ll see you during dinner. Sorry for abandoning you like this.”

Ginny shook her head and said, “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll go with Neville to find Luna and we’ll do something around here before heading back.”

They shared a peck on the lips before going their separate ways, Harry starting up a light jog to catch up with Ron.

They walked in silence for a while; Ron seemed to have calmed down slightly and was resolutely staring at his shoes whilst Harry merely gave him time to gather his thoughts together.

“I don’t really mind that my sister is dating, you know,” Ron began, “even if it’s you… might be better that it’s you actually, but that’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“You should’ve told me, that’s what. First, you don’t tell me about the Tournament, then Hermione doesn’t tell us about Krum and now this,” Ron continued before Harry could interrupt. “And I know the Tournament wasn’t your fault—you didn’t actually put your name in there—but it still feels like I’m always the one who knows last.”

And Harry realized, with sudden clarity, the disservice that he’d done to his best friend when he chose to keep his feelings for Ginny a secret. Ron might not have liked that Harry was dating his baby sister, and he might have also reacted badly when they told him, but they never even gave him
the benefit of the doubt instead of straight up deciding to keep in the dark.

“I’m sorry, Ron,” Harry apologized. “I didn’t mean to hide this from you. It just… happened… I guess, but I swear that I was going to tell you soon. Nobody else knows—we just wanted to keep it that way for a bit longer.”

“I get it,” said Ron. “You being who you are… but you know I’m not like everyone else—I wouldn’t have hounded you or given you grief like the twins will.”

“I know that, and Ginny knows that as well, I just think we weren't ready to tell anyone yet and then Malfoy showed up and did what he does best,” said Harry.

“Speak out of his arse? Put a foot in his mouth? Make you wish he'd never been born?” Ron suggested.

Harry laughed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

They continued on their trek in silence for the following minutes, the tension from before having dissipated.

“You really like my sister?” Ron asked doubtfully.

“I really do. I think she's a great person,” answered Harry.

“If anyone's strong enough to put up with her, I suppose it might as well be you,” Ron joked. “Just… I don't want to know anything, alright? I mean, I guess it's fine if you,” —Ron swallowed and shuddered— “kiss her or whatever, but keep it to a minimum in front of me.”

“This mean we're good?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Yeah, we're good, mate,” said Ron, slapping Harry on the back and bringing him closer to add, “but if you hurt her, you'll have the entire Weasley family coming after you. Treat her right.”

“I promise,” vowed Harry.

Seemingly satisfied with his answer, Ron nodded his head and they continued on their stroll back to the castle, talking about whichever topic wouldn’t cause another fight and enjoying their time alone with a good friend.
“I’m telling you, there’s something fishy going on there,” said Ron, jumping over a patch of ice, “why else would she be interested in someone like him? There’s something we don’t know about this whole Krum and Hermione thing. What if he imperiused her? He can do that, you know—they teach you Dark Arts like it’s no one’s business at Durmstrang.”

“Ron, I’m sure we would’ve noticed if someone had imperiused Hermione,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “Just accept it and move on. He’s leaving at the end of the year anyway so it’s not like they’ll be able to continue whatever this is for more than a couple more months.”

“You’re right,” breathed Ron, shutting his eyes in apparent relief. “We’ll be rid of him by the end of the year and it’s goodbye Vicky.”

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes again and led the conversation elsewhere as the two continued on their way up the hill to Hogwarts castle. They were chatting about the charms essay they still had to finish for the beginning of next week when movement from the Black Lake caught their attention. They watched as one of the giant squid’s many tentacles rose up and out of the water, curling in on itself in a perfect swirl before smashing down on something large and dark floating on the water. It looked like a ratty old coat, or perhaps a big fish caught unawares by the squid. Either way, the boys watched as two tentacles wrapped themselves around it and dragged it under water, leaving only a series of bubbles behind.

“That was…” said Harry.

“Weird,” finished Ron. “Really weird. I’ve never seen the squid do that before—you think someone was stupid enough to fall in and that’s what the squid..?”

“I don’t know… I’d hope not, but it did kinda look like a person to me too,” said Harry. “Come on, let’s get a closer look.”

Soon, they were standing on the small beach which made up the edges of the lake. They squinted against the fog rolling in from the horizon and tried to make out any shapes, forms or clues that would aid their suspicions or pulverize them entirely. The giant squid did nothing else of note though, so Harry and Ron were left to stare at the still waters of the Black Lake.

“What are you two doing out here in the middle of the day when you could be in Hogsmeade having a grand ol’ time?” Professor Moody’s gruff voice coming from behind the pair of Gryffindors gave them a small fright. “Constant vigilance! Never let yourself be fooled into a false sense of security, even when you think you’re on safe grounds,” lectured Moody.

“Professor,” said Harry, “we were just looking out at the lake, trying to catch sight of the giant squid.”

Moody’s magical-eye swung towards the lake whilst his other one remained fixed on Harry, the same blur surrounding his face as the first time he saw him. “Couple of fourth year students, I would’ve thought you’d gotten over such fancy with the school mascot,” said Moody.

“We just saw it come up for air a couple of minutes ago and thought we’d get a closer look,” Ron added.

“Ah, saw something interesting, did’ya?” asked Moody, leaning heavily on his staff as he regarded the two students with analytical eyes.
He wasn’t sure what it was, but Harry suddenly got a sinking feeling in his stomach; a primordial instinct, perhaps, warning him to take careful steps or he might not end up surviving the night. His instincts had served him well in the past and he wasn’t going to question them now.

“No, sir,” Harry jumped in before Ron could say anything, “we didn’t see anything important, just checking out the lake before joining our friends for the feast—I’m sure they’ll be wondering what’s taking us so long.”

Professor Moody went perfectly still. “Wouldn’t want to keep your friends waiting, Potter; be mighty rude of you.”

The ex-Auror stepped aside and motioned them forward with a scarred hand waving in the air. Sharing respectful nods, Ron and Harry wordlessly continued on their trek back to the castle and didn’t speak to each other until they’d already walked through the doors and left Moody well behind.

“Harry,” hissed Ron, “what the bloody hell was all that about? We should’ve told Moody what we saw! He’s an ex-Auror and our Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.”

“We don’t even know what we saw, Ron—if anything—and I got a weird feeling about Moody just now.”

“Everyone gets a weird feeling around Moody,” dismissed Ron, “he looks like a patchworked scarecrow—of the highest order and respect, of course—but still.”

“This was different. I can’t explain it, I just got a feeling, is all,” Harry insisted.

“Alright, mate, I believe you, but I’m telling you, Mad-Eye is one of the good guys,” said Ron.

Harry nodded and chose not to say anything.

By the time they got to the great hall, Harry had pushed their encounter with Mad-Eye Moody to the side in favour of chatting with his fellow housemates as they dropped in one by one. The feast that evening wasn’t much grander than those enjoyed daily at Hogwarts, but it stood out from the rest to Harry as it was the first he got to spend openly with Ginny at his side without worrying about Ron getting clued in on their new relationship. If Ron just so happened to scoot that much closer to his sister once she sat down in front of Harry, no one made a comment about it and the meal was an enjoyable one.

After that Hogsmeade visit, word soon got out that Harry Potter was dating Ginny Weasley and the stares that had died down slightly were resurrected. Although she’d known what to expect, Harry could tell that Ginny felt uncomfortable under the weight of unwanted fame and gossip. She confessed to him once that it kind of reminded her of the beginning of her second year, when everyone had still been reeling from the events of the Chamber of Secrets and were hesitant to take their eyes off her, lest she commit some other Dark crime.

Harry was sure he’d never hated his fame as much as he did after Ginny told him that. So much so that she’d had to pull him aside to have a talk with him when his glares to every student that passed her by started becoming an issue.

Other than commenting to their friends what they’d witnessed on the shore of the Black Lake and their curious (to Harry, anyway) conversations with Professor Moody, the topic had yet to be breached again as Neville’s suggestion that a bird might have had some bad luck and landed in the giant squid’s clutches was more palatable than anything else they’d come up with.

And so, the following week and a half passed by in a flurry of activity and anticipation for Harry and
his friends. Although they still continued their sessions in the empty classroom, they’d changed it up to simply putting Harry’s spellwork to the test by having him duel his friends—sometimes more than one at a time—even if he hadn’t fared that well when Luna had pulled out a surprising Tickling Charm that had left Harry rolling on the ground in stitches and had quickly ended the match in her favour.

The night before the second task, however, they had decided to take a break from all the hard work and enjoy the day playing a friendly game of Quidditch on the pitch. Whilst Harry, Ron, Ginny, and surprisingly Neville, had taken to the sky, Luna and Hermione had remained on the ground as self-appointed commentator and referee respectively. They were soon joined by the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, then by Colin Creevey and a couple of his friends from his and Ginny’s year. The game caught the attention of students from all around the Hogwarts grounds, including students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, and ran well into the afternoon, past the setting of the sun and nearly bled into dinner time if it hadn’t been for Ron’s growling stomach putting a halt to the activity.

It turned out that a spirited game of Quidditch had been exactly what Harry had needed right before facing the second task, as that night his recurring nightmare of being the only champion to drown in the lake was nowhere in sight and he was able to enjoy a dreamless sleep.

“Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” yelled Ron, shaking Harry awake from sleep as he threw his clothes at him through the open curtain around his bed.

“What’s goin’ on?” mumbled Harry.

“You’re late is what’s going on,” exclaimed Ron as he attempted to fit a leg through the sleeve of his shirt. “I don’t know how and I don’t know why but no one was bloody smart enough to think of waking us up,” —Ron glared at the three empty beds in their dorm— “before they headed down to sodding breakfast!”

“Today’s the second task,” Harry suddenly realized out loud. “I’m gonna miss the second task!” he scrambled out of bed and matched Ron’s hurried pace.

“About damn time you realized,” muttered Ron.

They dressed in record time and ran down stairways, halls and grass to get to the lake in time. As the sounds of cheering and whistling reached his ears, Harry didn’t know whether to feel relieved or terrified that already the crowd was riled up to go.

“Where were you?” Nevilled accosted them as they made their way through the throng of people surrounding the pier. “Dumbledore was just getting ready to send out a search party for you, Harry. The judges are all waiting for you to begin… Hurry!”

Harry was pushed forward by Ron and Neville before he could get a word in edgewise. He stumbled onto the wooden boards of the pier and was met with worried half-glances from the other champions and unimpressed squints from the judges seated high up on their platform. Bagman stepped up to the podium as Harry began to dress down to his swimwear.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Students and professors alike! Welcome to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament!” Bagman waited for the cheering to die down before continuing. “This year has been marked not only by the introduction of a fourth champion for the first time in the tournament’s history… but also by the inclusion of the youngest champion the tournament has ever seen!” a roar of excitement followed Bagman’s declaration. “And now, I present to you: the second task! At the sound of my alarm the champions will dive into the Black Lake where they will have one hour to retrieve something that was stolen from them…”
As Bagman continued explaining the rules of the tournament, Harry let his eyes wander across the stands. He couldn’t find Ginny anywhere and, upon closer inspection, Hermione appeared to be absent as well. Harry knew that neither his best friend nor his girlfriend would voluntarily miss the tournament and that only left him with one other option. Harry stared at the murky black water with a new sense of apprehension and anger—they’d taken two of the people most important to him and placed them in a lake filled with magical beasts and creatures that he didn’t even know the names of.

Around him, the other champions wore shocked and scared expressions on their faces as Bagman revealed the hostage situation to an enraptured audience.

“Champions, on my mark,” —Harry took out his wand— “get set,” —the spells were braced on the tip of his tongue— “go!”

Fleur and Cedric were the first to jump in the lake, Bubble-Head Charms in place. Harry quickly transfigured his feet into flippers and placed the same charm over his head whilst Krum pierced through the water as a half-shark, half-human hybrid. Harry placed a last minute Warming Charm on himself and joined the other three champions in the water.

Although the cold didn’t affect his movements, Harry could still feel the low temperature of the water as it rushed past his skin and pressed closer against him the deeper he swam. With only darkness, algae and moss covered rocks guiding his way, Harry quickly lost track of time. He’d considered lighting his wand as a means to see further than five metres around him but had decided against it when it brought up the likely scenario of attracting God knows what to him.

Deeper and deeper he headed into the lake. A couple of times he thought he spotted a big shape swimming out in front of him but when it always turned out to be a floating log or a clump of weed, Harry quickly lost faith in what he saw and even started questioning the brief flashes of red that he’d spotted once as he’d swam around a field of underwater grass. Having no clue as to how much time had passed since he dove in the water, Harry was immensely relieved when the makings of building structures started to take form in the distance.

He began to push harder, urging his body to cut faster through the water when the tall, imposing shapes of Merpeople swimming around with staffs, swords and shields became more clear. Sound was also making its way up to him… he couldn’t discern what it was, but something was naggingly familiar about the low tune. He could just about make out a couple of words when, suddenly, something reached out from the depths of a field of weeds and grabbed hold of his ankle.

Twisting around, the red, horned face of a grindylow greeted him as it used its spindly arms to climb up Harry’s legs. A second underwater demon joined the first at Harry’s waist before he could shake the first one off; it clawed at his chest and tried to poke holes into the bubble surrounding his head. Jerking around in their grasp, Harry pointed his wand at the beast on his chest and yelled, “Relashio!”

He’d been expecting red sparks to shoot out of his wand, but instead, jets of boiling hot water hit the grindylow in the face and immediately forced him to break his grip. He did the same thing to the grindylow on his legs and took off, swimming as fast as he could and only glancing back when another one of the little beasts managed to grab a hold of his feet. He started stunning them, watching the frozen creatures collide with oncoming ones and leaving them behind to the muted sound of growls and shrieks.

Up ahead, nestled in an underwater valley, Harry could now distinguish houses made of bedrock and arches leading to the centre of the aquatic city. As he floated down what appeared to be roads, Harry noted the lack of Merpeople frequenting the streets and followed the sound of singing. The lyrics to the song became clearer and he recognized the haunting melody of the clue from the golden egg.
Harry came to an opening in the maze of rocks and emerged in a place resembling a village square. A choir of Merpeople—tall, grey beings with scaled skin, a fish tail for legs and shockingly orange hair—were singing in front of a crudely carved statue depicting a Merperson dressed in fighting garb and standing over a second creature that Harry had never seen before. Tied to the spear on the statue were Ginny, Hermione and little girl with blonde hair. He approached them and, luckily, the Merpeople guarding the hostages didn’t put up any resistance to his being there. Swimming up to Ginny, Harry observed that she appeared to be under some type of sleeping spell with the others, but he was glad to note that they seemed to be breathing fine underwater.

“*Diffindo!*” said Harry.

The ropes tying Ginny to the statue were cut loose and Harry quickly grabbed a hold of her. He was getting ready to leave when he caught sight of Hermione once more, her normally bushy hair floating serenely around her face as she slept, unaware of the danger she was in. He knew she must be Krum’s hostage, just like he was sure that the fair haired little girl next to her was supposed to be Fleur’s. There was a set of empty ropes lying lose next to the girl—Harry assumed Cedric must have gotten to his hostage already—but that didn’t explain where Krum and Fleur were.

All of a sudden, a bulky shape cut through the water, breaking past the Merpeople guards and heading straight for Hermione. Harry placed himself in its path and was ready to blast the beast out of the water when he noticed human arms and legs sticking out of it. With a jolt, Harry realized Krum had arrived and he watched as the transfigured wizard slowed down approaching the hostages. Krum spared a glance to the blonde haired girl, then spied Harry and shook his shark head; Fleur wouldn’t be arriving any time soon.

Krum reared back and cut through Hermione’s binding with his teeth, ensnaring her rope in his mouth and swimming off with her form trailing after him. Fastening his grip on Ginny, Harry mentally groaned at what he was about to do and shot off the spell to cut the ropes on the little girl.

At once, Merpeople surrounded him, pointing their spears at him and bracing their swords for a fight.

“You must only take one,” said the beast holding the spear to his throat.

“I don’t care, I’m not leaving her down here. Her champion’s not coming and I’m taking her with me,” said Harry, his words came out garbled and incomprehensible, but the Merpeople seemed to understand for they advanced on him with weapons raised. Reaching back to his practice sessions, Harry recalled a spell that Hermione had been reluctant to share with him because of its use against the Merpeople.

“*Disperge populus mare!*” said Harry, pointing his wand at the nearest Merperson. A purple jet of light hit the beast on the breast and propelled it backward several metres, ending in a crash against one of the stone dwellings.

The rest of the Merpeople rose up in outrage at the sight of their fallen companion and the frills around their necks rose up imposingly around their faces as they screeched and bore their teeth. Harry levelled his wand at them threateningly. The Merperson holding a spear to his throat recoiled from him and barked words in Mermish to the rest of the group. They reluctantly backed away from Harry and allowed him to grab hold of the little girl. With both hands occupied, Harry would be hard pressed to defend himself and the two hostages if the Merpeople were to attack, but luckily for him they held off.

Harry swam away under the watchful eyes of the Merpeople and heard the first strains of their song begin again once he could no longer make out their village. As he pushed forward with his legs and urged his spellwork to last long enough to reach the shore, Harry found himself aching for some sign
that he was getting closer—with the added weight pulling him back, he didn’t know how much longer he could swim for, or if he’d reach the beach on time.

The water started becoming less dense, darker colours regained some light and Harry no longer felt pressed down by the pressure in the very depths of the lake—he must be getting closer. As the first feeble rays of sun cut through the water in thin pillars of light, one of them hit upon a large figure in Harry’s path. Slowing down his pace, Harry swam closer and was able to discern the shapes of Krum and Hermione floating ahead.

Both to the Durmstrang champion’s luck and misfortune, his botched transfiguration spell didn’t seem to have faded yet, so he was able to breathe underwater, yet his shark head also impeded him from continuing ahead, if his struggling body was anything to go by. Harry watched as Krum fought and pulled against the rope tied to Hermione which was stuck under some underwater debris.

Harry watched as the rope pulled taut against Krum’s shark teeth and caught up on a branch protruding from the lake floor, Hermione’s body shaking from side to side at the sharp motion.

“Krum! Krum, stop!” shouted Harry as he approached the other boy. One of Krum’s beady eyes focused on Harry and seemed to understand his message, for he stopped pulling on the rope and remained still.

Loosening his hold on the little girl, Harry let her float on top of himself and grabbed onto her rope with the arm cradling Ginny, leaving his right arm open for use. A wave of his wand and the lake floor underneath Hermione erupted in a small storm of dirt and weeds. The mud had dislodged from the branch holding the rope captive to reveal a striking, pale white colour—something that Harry had never seen before. Before he could be tempted to explore any further, Krum gave one last tug and dragged Hermione forward, causing her foot to bump against the branch and uproot it from the ground.

A skeletal hand peered at Harry from the soil, jarring the champions to complete stillness. What happened next, Harry would have a hard time explaining later as he wasn’t entirely sure how it came about: suddenly, Krum seemed to grasp the enormity of what was right in front of them and chose that very moment to remember he was a wizard capable of doing magic and shot of a burst of energy at the dark clump on the ground that sent the mound shooting to the sky at the same time that the backlash propelled the five students to the surface of the water.

“Wha—what’s going on?” sputtered Ginny as she woke up from her sleep. “Why—why am I in th—the water?” her teeth chattered together as she spoke. “Ha—Harry, where are we?”

Harry grabbed her in a tight embrace and planted a kiss on her cold, blue lips. “Shh, it’s alright, Gin. You’re okay… we’re in the Black Lake now and we have to get to shore. Can you swim okay?” she nodded.

Looking around himself, Harry saw Krum had reverted back to his human self and was busy comforting the fair haired girl with Hermione at his side. Harry breathed a sigh of relief that his friends were all well and the five of them began paddling towards the sounds of screams and applause.

“Gabrielle! Gabrielle, ma petite chèrie, come ‘ere!”

A harried looking Fleur reached out a shaking hand to the fair haired girl and pulled her to her chest once she was safe on the ground. She kissed the little girl’s cheeks and spoke in hurried French to her, seemingly absorbing her hesitant shakes and nods before yanking her close once more.
“Harry! Ginny! Hermione!” yelled Ron, pushing past the gathering spectators with Neville and Luna at his side. He reached out a hand to his sister and said, “I had no idea where you were… we were looking all over for you and didn’t realize you were one of the hostages until Luna made the connection. What were they bloody well thinking! Putting you down there with all those… those monsters a—and the giant squid! Please tell me you didn’t run into that oversized shrimp of a beast,” pleaded a pale Ron.

“Don’t worry, Ron,” said Ginny as he moved to help Harry next. “Harry was right there to save me—again—and he did so rather splendidly. The only complaint I have is waking up, disoriented and soaking wet in the middle of the lake.”

“No refunds,” joked Harry, “there’s no amount of money you can pay me to go through that again.”

“I agree,” intoned Krum, appearing behind them with Hermione in tow.

“Harry, Ginny, are you two okay?” asked Hermione. “I don’t remember much in between drinking that potion in Dumbledore’s office and then waking up a few minutes ago.”

“We’re fine, Hermione.”

“Did you talk to the Merpeople, Harry?” Luna jumped in. “I hear they’re a fascinating people whose song can bring even the most powerful wizard down to his knees.”

“I actually did,” —six sets of eyes widened at his admission— “but I don’t think they liked me very much… and that’s putting it mildly.”

“That’s a shame,” Luna was truly downtrodden, “if they had, then maybe we could’ve convinced the Chieftess to sit for an interview for the Quibbler.”

Ron rolled his eyes and received a nudge to his side from Neville for his trouble.

“‘Arry! ‘Arry!” Fleur came barging through the group with Gabrielle glued to her side. “I cannot thank you enough for what you did for my sister. It was ze grindylows… zey grabbed me and I… I didn’t know what to do… and poor Gabrielle…” Fleur’s bottom lip began to tremble dangerously. “I don’t know how to zank you enough!”

She threw herself into Harry’s arms and planted two kisses on each of his cheeks. Her hair slapped Harry in the face when she immediately twirled around and dragged her blushing sister away.

“She does know it was a team effort, right? How come it’s always you that gets kissed by the pretty girl?” said Ginny.

Harry huffed a laugh and hid his burning face in her hair before Ron could have a chance to comment. He turned his gaze to the other champions and saw Cedric and Cho huddled close together under a blanket a couple of metres away whilst being tended to by Madame Pomfrey. Further down the platform, Fleur continued to fret over her sister and Hermione had accompanied Krum to greet his Bulgarian friends (a fact which caused Ron to cross his arms and wallow in his own anger as he stole surreptitious glances at them).

High above the spectator’s benches, enclosed in their own private viewing cabin, stood the four judges and Percy Weasley with their heads bent together, discussing the points they would grant to the champions. It was as Bagman had his wand pointed to his own throat, about to cast the Sonorous Spell, that the Merpeoples’ chieftess emerged out of the water and hovered at the edge of the lake.

The crowd rose in awe at the sea creature clad in a long robe of dark green weeds and a head garb of
shells, fish bones and colorful stones, resembling a five pointed crown, sitting atop her head. Tied around her waist was a medieval looking sword, swinging down next to a black garment bag clutched in one hand.

“What’s going on?” asked Neville.

“I have no idea,” said Harry.

“Do you think it has something to do with you? Like, maybe they didn’t like how you talked to them or something—they don’t have the same customs we do.”

“How I talked to them would be at the very last place of their list of complaints, trust me.”

Dumbledore had reached the beach and had begun talking to the chieftess, who loomed over him at least two feet taller. Their conversation apparently coming to a close, the chieftess handed him the bag and retreated to the water, walking out into its depths until only the tallest tip of her crown could be seen and then that, too, disappeared with the rest of her.

Harry held his breath as Dumbledore peered inside the bundle of fabric and visibly recoiled; he then seemed to scan the crowd, gaze lingering first on Krum, and then Harry.

The headmaster touched the tip of his wand to his neck and spoke, “Due to unforeseen circumstances, I would like to ask all students to head back to Hogwarts and remain in the great hall under the supervision of our Hogwarts staff. Visitors to the school, I apologize for the interruption, but I’m afraid there are crucial matters which supersede the tournament that the judges and I must handle immediately. Judges, follow me.”

The professors started herding the students down the stands and to the path leading back to the castle as Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Bagman and Percy (stepping in for Crouch) converged around Dumbledore. Harry slowly allowed himself to be pulled along by his group of friends as they walked to the main gates. Hermione had joined them by now and kept throwing back curious looks at the small gathering of adults, exchanging a glance or two with Harry as she caught him staring back as well.

“Something very important must have happened for Dumbledore to cancel the rest of the second task like that,” Hermione commented.

“Dumbledore kept looking at you, Harry,” noted Neville, much to the other’s visible surprise. “Hey, just because I don’t say much doesn’t mean I don’t notice things as well,” he defended himself, “you guys aren’t nearly as sneaky as you’d like to think you are.”

A memory of Neville, lying stupefied on the ground of their common room in first year came to Harry’s mind.

“The chieftess seemed worried and angry at the same time… perhaps she needed the headmaster’s help in figuring out what plagued the lake,” Luna’s airy voice broke in.

“How do you know she was worried and angry?” asked Ron. “She sounded like she was laying it on Dumbledore with the way she was talking.”

“That’s just the way Mermish sounds—you should know, Ron, you heard the egg’s song before we could translate it,” said Hermione.

“I think Luna’s right though,” added Ginny, “and Dumbledore didn’t look pleased with what he was hearing either. And if Dumbledore’s worried…”
“Then we all have reason to worry.”

The great hall was jam-packed with the students from all three schools. Professors passed by each house table and took note of the children who were present and those who weren’t, sending up prefects to the house dormitories to look for any stragglers that hadn’t attended the second task.

As the last person stepped through the doorway to the great hall, the doors sealed themselves shut and let out a yellow glow. Murmuring rose up throughout the student body as they waited anxiously for their questions to be answered.

“That’s not scary at all,” muttered Ron, “having the doors magically lock like that… keeping all of us in here… with no way to escape.”

“Why would you want to escape? Nothing has happened yet. And in any case, how do you know the doors weren’t locked to keep something from coming in?”

Hermione’s counterproposal caused the colour to drain from Neville’s face and Ron to look thoughtful, turning a calculating stare to the closed doors.

His friends continued to postulate possible theories for the school siege whilst Harry scanned the crowd of faculty and students. Predictably, the other school houses looked as confused as they were and kept sharing considering whispers back and forth. Somewhat surprisingly, however, McGonagall and the rest of the professors were doing the same thing themselves from their places at the high table.

With no explanation in sight, Hogwarts was at a standstill as the great hall teemed with far-fetched conspiracy theories involving a centaur legion from the Forbidden Forest gone rogue and declaring war on the Merpeople in the lake to Bagman being questioned by the judges as his apparently well-known penchant for a good gamble had cost him the money for the tournament’s prize.

Food was sent up from the house elves when lunch time arrived and no news were heard from anyone, but as the students began to feel restless being cooped up in one room all together, the professors resorted to transfiguring the cutlery into various table games and Professor Flitwick even held a short lesson on fun charms to keep the younger students occupied.

“It’s been hours,” said Harry, waiting for Ron to make his move on the chessboard. “Must be pretty important if they’re keeping us locked in here for that long.”

“I’m surprised the Slytherins haven’t started a small rebellion by now,” answered Ron, “I suppose even they know when it’s time to keep their trap shut and follow the rules.”

“Don’t be rude,” said Hermione, “we’re not exactly much different, you know. How many rules did we all brake in our first year alone? And you didn’t see any Slytherins matching that.”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“It just is and you know it. Checkmate,” Ron’s pawn stood two paces away from Harry’s king.

“Dammit,” curse Harry.

The pawn grabbed its two swords and swung them high, severing the king’s head and holding it up for the rest of the pieces to cheer at and mourn for, in turn.
“Barbaric,” sniffed Hermione.

An hour later, the doors to the great hall shone bright once more and were then pushed open, allowing Dumbledore, the other two heads of school, Bagman and two other wizards dressed in Auror robes to stalk inside. The witches and wizards already in the hall immediately fell silent as the judges took their seats whilst the Aurors remained stationed at the door as Dumbledore strode up to the podium.

“Dear students and members of staff; thank you for being so patient with us as we endeavoured to take care of a crucial matter—previously unknown to us—which the Merchieftess was kind enough to bring to our attention.

“As some of you may know, Mr Crouch was said to be unable to attend the past tournament events due to health issues he was not comfortable disclosing,” Dumbledore paused dramatically. “Today, we discovered the real reason why Mr Crouch was not able to make it to the second task today: it was his body that the Merchiefess delivered to me as we stood at the Black Lake. Bartemius Crouch is dead.”

The silence in the great hall was broken up by shocked gasps and terrified wails; even the professors seemed to be deeply troubled by the news as they grasped their chests and shook their heads in disbelief.

“To quell any rumours that might spiral out of these terrible news, I will disclose the following: Mr Crouch was found by the Merpeople after his body was pushed by unknown forces,” (Harry could’ve sworn that Dumbledore looked at him as he said this), “to the surface of the lake. It is unknown when, exactly, he entered the lake, or the cause of his death. The matter has now been handed over to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to be investigated further and they were courteous enough to agree to provide us with regular updates as to the progress in their findings. Now, I would like to request a moment of silence for the dearly departed Mr Crouch.”

Everyone bowed their heads in respect, not a peep to be heard in the great hall as each individual took the time of quiet to process the news. From his end, Harry couldn’t stop thinking, his mind wouldn’t stop whirling with the possibilities that this new event brought forth and the many questions that remained. How long would Crouch’s body have gone undiscovered if the second task hadn’t happened and Krum hadn’t gotten Hermione caught in his remains? Harry was sure that was what he had seen down there—Crouch’s skeleton—as dismissing the obvious evidence as anything else other than such would be ludicrous.

Worse yet, Harry doubted Crouch had just fallen in the lake with a bad head cold and never gotten back out again… which meant there was a murderer out there, most likely in the school itself. Suddenly, Harry understood very well why Dumbledore had had everyone locked inside after hearing the news.

A warm hand in his brought Harry out of his musings; he looked up and saw that Ginny was leading him towards the Gryffindor tower, their friends not three steps ahead of them, heads huddled together as they hissed their thoughts at each other.

“Where did you go?” asked Ginny. “You were spaced out for quite some time there.”

“I didn’t have time to tell you this, but when you were unconscious in the lake and I was carrying you and Gabrielle, I ran into Krum having some trouble with bringing Hermione back. She was caught on some branch and I helped him free her, but… it wasn’t even a branch…” Harry tightened his hold on Ginny. “It was all… skeletal… and white… I didn’t know what to do and Krum panicked and blasted it all to hell.”
“Oh God,” gasped Ginny, “you think that was…?”

“I don’t see any other bodies turning up in the lake, so yeah,” said Harry, apologizing to Ginny for his sharp tone with a tremulous half-smile.

“You’ve clearly had a shock, so I’ll forgive you that one,” she said. “What about what you and Ron saw on Valentine’s day? It’s too big a coincidence for it all not to be connected somehow.”

“That must’ve been Crouch we saw getting pulled down by the—” he couldn’t even finish the sentence, shaking his head to dispel the unwanted images taking form in his mind.

“We have to tell someone,” said Ginny, “Dumbledore has handed this over to the DMLE; they could do a lot with this information.”

“I think he already knows, or at least suspects, that I had something to do with it,” Harry responded. “Not a stretch of the imagination, really. When aren’t you involved in the mysteries going on at this school?”

“Hey! You’ve had your fair share of adventure yourself.”

“Yeah, but not every single year I’ve been here,” retorted Ginny.

“In any case,” Harry made an effort to move the conversation back to where it was, “Ron and I weren’t the only ones at the lake when Crouch disappeared—Moody was there as well and he’s an ex-Auror, but…”

“What?”

“His face is blurry… and no, it’s not my eyesight acting up or anything…. There’s just something wrong with his face. It’s almost like I’m looking at him through some sort of film, like he’s hiding behind something.”

Ginny whistled. “First Crouch and now, this. What are we going to do?”

“Let’s talk to the others first and see what they think; maybe they’ll have better ideas,” said Harry.

Harry’s talk with Neville, Hermione and Ron went about as well as expected; Hermione was obviously horrified to hear what had happened to her while she was under the spell of a magical coma and Neville was shocked to hear their suspicions regarding Crouch’s disposal at the mercy of the giant squid. Ron was disgruntled to hear that his instincts had failed him with regards to Moody and apologetic to Harry for having dismissed his suspicions so easily.

“Even if Dumbledore suspects something—maybe the Merchief tess told him, who knows—you still have to tell him yourself,” reasoned Hermione. “Like Ginny said, this could help the Aurors with their investigation.”

“We should do everything we can to help if Crouch was killed and the murderer is still out there,” declared Neville. “They need to be caught before they can hurt anyone else.”

“Mate, you should go now and get it over with,” said Ron, “before the Aurors leave the school and head back to the Ministry.”

“That might not be necessary,” said Ginny. “Look.”

A few paces from the chairs they were sitting on, a stern owl was pecking impatiently at the glass
window, a letter held in its beak with the seal of the Ministry of Magic clearly visible. Ginny stood up to let it in, waiting as it flew straight to Harry, dropped the envelope on his lap and flew back out the window. Harry took a moment to check his name on the paper and ripped open the envelope, scanning through the contents quickly.

“They’re calling me in for a hearing,” he said, incredulously, “they want me to testify my account of the events of today in front of the full Wizengamot a week from today.”

“Sure… dad applies for a portkey permit to take us to the World Cup and it takes two months to process, but this—this, the ministry gets done in less than half a day,” muttered Ron.

Hermione shot him an acerbic look. “What are you going to do?”

“He has to go,” answered Neville. “This isn’t like when my gran got a notice for growing magical plants too close to a Muggle dwelling; this is a hearing. Harry will be in front of the entire wizengamot… that’s huge.”

“This isn’t a trial though, right? Harry won’t be questioned as a suspect, will he?” worried Ginny.

“I don’t know,” Hermione frowned as she answered.

“That answers one of our questions at least,” Harry said, dryly. “Dumbledore knows—and I wouldn’t be surprised if Krum received one of these as well.”

“Mate, aren’t you worried about this?” asked Ron. “Considering all the stuff that’s happened to us over the years… this one’s not the worst, but it’s the first time the ministry will really step in.”

“I suppose they would count sending soul-sucking monsters to a school as getting involved,” spat Harry, “but they can’t accuse me of anything without proof and since I didn’t do anything to Crouch, I think I’m alright.”

“Just be careful, Harry,” urged Ginny, “you don’t want the Wizengamot against you.”

Harry nodded and turned the conversation to something else. Each of the five friends slowly relaxed back into the rhythm of friendly banter as the hours passed and the little light outside disappeared into dusk and then night. At dinner that night, Bagman was in attendance and announced the points given to each champion for the completion of the second task. Cedric was in first place, Krum and Harry were tied for second and Fleur was last, having only been afforded twenty-five points (although Harry later heard her announcing to her friends that she should have received zero).

The ghost of the upcoming trial haunted Harry everywhere he went in the following days after the second task; a second couldn’t pass by without a reminder of what lay before him, even as his friends attempted to keep his mind occupied with other things. Crouch’s death made the front page of every magical newspaper in Britain the day after his body was found and the public were having a blast speculating on their own what could have happened to the important ministry employee. Every day of the week, letters arrived for Dumbledore in the morning mail, mostly Howlers from parents demanding better security at the school, causing such a large congestion of owls that Dumbledore had to ward the hall and redirect his own correspondence elsewhere.

On Thursday, March 3rd, Harry was excused from his classes to make it to his early morning appointment at the Ministry of Magic. He received supportive smiles from his friends, a cork and flower talisman from Luna (said to bring on good luck to the owner) and a kiss from Ginny before following Professor McGonagall to the front gate of the school.

“A word of advice, Potter,” she said as they stepped out into the brisk morning air, “do not let
“Professor, you don’t think they believe I had something to do with this, do you?” asked Harry. “I just found him, I didn’t—”

“I don’t know what they think they know yet, Potter,” she interrupted him, “but I do know this: you are a very important figure in our world, whether you like it or not, and a lot of people would have a lot to gain if you were to have a sudden fall from grace.”

“Fall from grace? Am I part of the royal family now?” Harry snorted.

McGonagall pursed her lips and said, “I understand it isn’t… easy… being who you are, but that does not mean you can allow yourself to stick your head in the sand and wish the monsters away. You know that better than anyone, Mr Potter.”

Harry ducked his head, hunching his shoulders as he took the reprimand for what it was and bobbed his head forward, acknowledging McGonagall’s sound advice. At the iron gate, Krum and Karkaroff were waiting in stoic silence for their arrival and McGonagall offered them a short nod before raising her wand and muttering an incantation under her breath. Harry, alone, saw the shimmering chains of magic that had been wrapped around the two doors suddenly become loose and disintegrate before him, the gate becoming clearer to distinguish as the protective layer of magical wards were lifted one by one. As soon as the last ward was gone, two figures—Aurors, Harry presumed, although the shorter one was wearing purple as opposed to the distinctive red uniform—materialised on the other side of the gate.

“Headmaster Karkaroff, Professor McGonagall,” greeted one of the Aurors, a tall, bald man with a baritone voice, “I am Kingsley Shacklebolt and this is Nymphadora Tonks—a cadet in the Auror academy. We are here to escort Mr Krum and Mr Potter to the ministry.”

“Nymphadora,” McGonagall said, warmly, “don’t think I could ever forget a student with such natural talent for Transfiguration. I am glad to see you’re doing very well for yourself. You best take good care of our students, here.”

To Harry’s surprise, the young woman’s hair turned from bubble-gum pink to cherry red at McGonagall’s compliment.

“Thank you, professor, and don’t you worry, they’ll be safe with us.”.

“Very well, off you go, you two,” McGonagall nudged the two boys forward, exchanging one last look with Harry before shutting the gates and putting up the wards once more, forcing the school to disappear from sight.

“This,” Kingsley took out a small, brown book, “is a portkey, it will take us straight into the atrium at the ministry so we can avoid the hounds at the front.”

“Reporters,” Tonks clarified with a grin.

“Place a finger on the portkey. On three, we’re off. One…” Kingsley counted down.

Harry and Krum’s eyes met over the tiny book, each wordlessly offering the other their own brand of good luck.

“Three.”
Chapter 20

The forceful landing jolted Harry out of the portkey-travel nausea, causing him to stumble into Tonks and desperately latch onto her arm for support. Krum and Kingsley didn’t look like they were having any such trouble, they were already walking across the circular hall to a group of elevators lining the wall.

“You know, you look nothing like I thought you would.” commented Tonks, huffing as she worked to steady Harry and began patting imaginary dirt off his robes, “I always pictured you a bit shorter and without glasses.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” said Harry.

They stepped into the elevator, Tonks adopting a more serious persona in the presence of Kingsley, though she still sent Harry a wink when the man’s back was turned.

“Level ten, courtrooms,” said Kingsley.

The doors shut with a clang and the elevator shook to a start, going backwards a few feet instead of down, and then beginning its sharp descent into the London underground.

“Level ten, courtrooms,” announced a cultured, female voice as the contraption finally came to a halt and the doors clanged open.

“Follow me.”

Krum and Harry set into step behind Kingsley, Tonks bringing up the rear, and followed the Auror as he led them down winding hallways, each one the same as the one before it. At last, they stopped at the end of one of the halls in front of a tall, brass door branded with a silver ten. Kingsley didn’t bother with a knock and simply marched into the room, leaving Harry and Krum to hurry in after him.

Dozens of eyes surveyed them; wizards and witches resting on the seats of the Wizengamot exchanged meaningful glances and secretive whispers whilst their eyes followed the small procession of four as they walked up to the Head Seat. Minister Fudge sat with Dumbledore to his left and a pudgy woman dressed entirely in pink to his right. His eyes roving around the room, Harry almost came to a stunned halt as his green eyes clashed with a familiar set of brown. Remus was sitting on one of the benches reserved for those few visitors allowed to watch the proceedings. He sent a wink at Harry, but refrained from any further form of greeting.

The young wizard fearfully scanned the rest of the room from top to bottom, relieved when he couldn’t find a single grim dog in sight or the telltale shimmering of an invisibility cloak being used. He had known very well that neither Remus nor Sirius had been thrilled when he had relayed his news to them, but Sirius risking his safety for Harry by showing up at the ministry was not something Harry needed weighing on his mind right now. Fortunately, his godfather seemed to have understood and Remus’ presence presented Harry with no moral struggle, like Sirius’ would, so Harry took strength from the werewolf’s show of support.

“Ah, I see our witnesses have finally made it,” said Fudge. “Excellent work, Auror Shacklebolt and…”

“Cadet Tonks, sir,” Tonks answered.
“Yes yes, very well done… Now the proceedings may begin. If everyone would please take their seats and call out when their name is read for public record.”

“If I may add something first, Cornelius,” voiced Dumbledore, receiving a nod from Fudge in return, “whilst reporters are allowed in these chambers to witness the the court in process, this is not a media circus, nor will the Wizengamot tolerate any misbehaviour on behalf of its visitors. If you breach any of the guidelines set forth by court law, you will be escorted outside and banned from any other events at the ministry in the foreseeable future. I hope I have made myself clear,” Dumbledore stared over his glasses at the crowd of reporters seated at the back, most of them cowered under his gaze except for Rita Skeeter, who straightened her posture, licked the tip of her quill and allowed it to hover over her parchment, meeting his steely stare with one of her own.

“Very well said, Albus, very well said,” declared Fudge. “Ladies and gentlemen, you know the drill, hear your name and call out your presence.”

The court scribe, an elderly woman with greying hair, round glasses that took up half her face and colorful beads adorning her neck, grasped her quill and began ticking off names. Once the last of the Wizengamot judges had announced their presence, the scribe took out a new piece of parchment, levitated her quill to have its tip resting on the paper and turned to Fudge.

“Misters Viktor Krum and Harry James Potter, take a seat,” —two metal chairs with restraints on the armrests rose up from the floor— “and we will begin our interrogation. You will each be given your turn to speak up on the events of Thursday, February 14th of last week, and will then be asked a series of questions to clarify any ambiguous statements,” Fudge cleared his throat. “Mr Krum, you may begin.”

Krum’s side of the story was almost identical to Harry’s, he explained how he unknowingly stumbled upon the skeletal remains of Crouch, the moment Harry arrived to assist Krum and the subsequent panic which pushed Krum to make a rash decision, exposing the remains to the world. A few Wizengamot members had some follow-up questions for him which were resolved quickly, making it Harry’s turn to speak.

“Everything that Krum said is correct, I was on my way back with my hostage—Ginny Weasley—and also Fleur’s when—”

“Hem-hem.”

All eyes turned to the woman sitting next to Fudge who held her hands folded together delicately on her table and was peering at Harry with fluttering eyes.

“Excuse me, Minister, I know I am not part of the Wizengamot and merely here as your Senior Undersecretary, but I couldn’t help but wonder what Mr Potter was doing down there with two hostages—one more than he was meant to take,” her high-pitched, saccharine tone grated on Harry like nothing else.

“I knew that Fleur—her sister and champion—couldn’t show up, and I couldn’t leave her down there—alone and defenceless,” said Harry.

“Defenceless, you say? I was given to understand that the hostages were well protected by measures put forth by your Headmaster and the Ministry itself,” Umbridge briefly turned to Fudge, as though seeking validation to her words.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Harry answered forcefully, “I was down there with the Merpeople at the bottom of the lake and believe me, you wouldn’t want to leave anyone down there amidst
Umbridge let out a small giggle and said, “Why, it almost sounds like you didn’t trust your superiors to do their jobs correctly… or perhaps the call to glory was too great to resist… you are the youngest champion in the history of the Triwizard Tournament, are you not? And also an anomaly in the game itself as it has never before permitted a fourth champion to take part.”

“Yeah, I guess I am, but—”

“And you hold the name Harry James Potter to boot—I can’t possibly imagine the amount of fame and idolisation that feat must have brought you… one can hardly fault the boy for allowing some of it to get to his head and at such a young age, too,” added Umbridge with a faux sympathetic smile.

“If you mean my parents being killed by Voldemort when I was a child and me being the only survivor of the attack, then yeah, I suppose it has made me rather well-known to the wizarding world,” snapped Harry, cheeks flushed red as his hands fisted the chains hanging at his sides.

The Wizengamot members were murmuring amongst themselves, flashing their eyes from Harry to Umbridge as their discussion escalated, faces more considering than before as they landed on Harry with new meaning.

“Forgive me, my boy, I did not mean to be so insensitive as to provoke such a reaction out of you,” —the glint in her eyes, however, said otherwise— “I just found it… curious… that you were the only champion who chose to break the rules of the tournament to save a girl you hadn’t even met before and who was perfectly safe exactly where she was.”

Harry was about to respond when Dumbledore spoke up instead, “Madame Umbridge, I would like to remind you that it is the death of Mr Crouch that we are interested in, not Mr Potter’s performance in the second task which, I am correct in saying, is the responsibility of the judges presiding over the tournament to determine,” Dumbledore smiled genially. “However, if you still have some inquiries or concerns, feel free to contact myself, Mr Bagman or any other member from the Department of Magical Games and Sports—I’m sure they’d be happy to assuage your worries.”

Umbridge’s left eye twitched. She pursed her lips in a tight facade of a smile and nodded her head minutely.

“Continue, Mr Potter,” called out another woman from the Wizengamot, one whom Harry vaguely recalled having seen on the cover of the Daily Prophet a few times.

Harry continued with his retelling of events, never once was he interrupted by anyone again and was only asked three questions from different members of the Wizengamot before Fudge said, “That concludes the statements from our two prime witnesses, if no one has anything else to add—”

“Actually,” interrupted Harry, clearing his throat, “I saw something a couple of weeks ago that I think may have a connection to Mr Crouch’s death…” he trailed off uncertainly when no visible response came forth.

“We don’t have all day, boy,” grumbled an elderly man with a beer-belly, “get on with it.”

“Right… My friend Ron and I were walking to the castle—back from Hogsmeade—when we passed by the lake and saw the giant squid… pull something down from the surface of the water. At first, I thought it was someone’s cloak that had blown away with the wind, but… now that Mr Crouch was found in the lake…” Harry let his words wash over the gathered men and women.

“You believe this thing that you saw to be the body of Mr Crouch,” summarized the woman that had
been on newspapers many times—Amelia Bones, Harry recalled.

“We didn’t get a close look at it because it was pretty far in the water, but yeah, I’d bet that it wasn’t just part of the giant squid’s daily routine to pull human shaped forms down for dinner,” Harry swallowed nervously, suddenly afraid he’d gotten too comfortable in his assessment.

“I see… In light of this new development, I ask that the Wizengamot take fifteen minutes to review the information behind chamber doors,” proposed Madame Bones.

“Seconded,” the sound of chairs scraping on linoleum filled the room. “Everyone else, remain seated—no one is to speak to the witnesses without express approval. Aurors, stand guard,” ordered Fudge.

Members of the Wizengamot exited through a back door, leaving Harry seated in the centre of the room with only a silent Krum to keep him company and Kingsley and Tonks standing at their respective sides. The soft murmurs from the people behind him soothed Harry into relaxing for the first time since he entered the room. He couldn’t see where Remus was from where he was sitting, he’d have to turn around to do that and he didn’t want to get into any trouble with the Aurors, so he stayed as he was and leaned back in his chair.

An Auror by the entrance had edged the door open, allowing a cool breeze to waft in the room, brush against Harry’s face. He could hear the rustling of Tonk’s clothes as she shifted in her spot. The room started to blur around the edges… eyes drooping… down…

He was in an old room, looking out from the depths of an armchair… the hearth in the corner was unlit… darkness pervaded… Two dark shapes on the floor, one of them smaller than the other, stirred… one of them whimpered and sobbed into the floor…

“It seems your luck never runs out Wormtail… Crouch is dead… Someone else, more useful and loyal to me than you, got the job done right,” Harry hissed—only it didn’t sound like his voice at all, it was different… weak, raspy and cruel.

“Th-that is great news, my Lord,” squeaked Pettigrew. “Thank you… Thank you… I promise it will not happen again.”

“You’ve misunderstood me… I won’t feed you to Nagini… this time… but you haven’t earned my forgiveness yet,” that same dead voice spoke out of Harry—Voldemort’s.

“Master,” sobbed Pettigrew, “I beg of you… no more. It will never happen again—I swear it on—”

“You were a fool. Your blunder with Crouch—then that useless woman—nearly cost me greatly. You need a little reminder, to keep the lesson fresh in your memory.”

“My Lord,” pleaded Pettigrew, “I beg you…”

Voldemort raised a grey, feeble arm, the size of a malnourished infant’s, and pointed the tip of the wand at the quivering man.

“Crucio!”

Gut-wrenching screams erupted from Pettigrew’s mouth, he spasmed on the floor, tears mixing with his drool as he succumbed to the effects of the curse. Harry screamed alongside him, feeling the pleasure Voldemort was experiencing as his own, watching his own hand torture a man he thought he’d be happy to see suffer (and a part of him—the one that couldn’t tell the difference between Voldemort’s mind and his own—was). His screaming lasted for upwards of a minute and then the
curse was lifted and Voldemort’s arm receded into the chair.

“Nagini,” Voldemort called out, waiting as the other form on the ground unwound itself and slithered to the armchair, hissing cruel taunts at the trembling man on the floor. “Come, my sweet, we have lots to plan… Harry Potter is waiting…”

The snake slithered around Voldemort’s neck, Harry kept screaming, the curse had come to an end but the pain had become his own as the scar on his forehead burned and burned and...

“Potter! Harry!”

Stinging on his left cheek. Harry was brought out of the nightmare with a start. He opened his eyes, sweat drenched his shirt as it stuck to his chest, Tonks was staring down at him worriedly, hand poised above her head, prepared to strike him once more.

“What was that?” she demanded. “I couldn’t get you to respond, I thought I’d have to send a Stinging Jinx your way.”

“I-I think I feel asleep,” stammered Harry, “had a nightmare and couldn’t wake up… Nothing to worry about—I get those sometimes.”

Tonks seemed hesitant to take his word. “If you’re sure,” she said, “not many people noticed what was going on except that man over there, he waved me over and said he thought you were having a seizure.”

Harry followed Tonks’ pointing finger to see Remus teetering on the edge of his seat, trying to appear nonchalant as he closely observed Harry for any signs of further distress. Harry sent him a small thumbs up, earning a disbelieving raised eyebrow from Remus who, nonetheless, relaxed back in his seat.

“That’s… my uncle Remus,” explained Harry.

“I thought your uncle was a Muggle,” said Tonks.

“Yeah, he is. Remus isn’t really my uncle, he’s more of a… family friend, I guess—he’s here for support.”

“That’s very kind of him,” commented Tonks, letting her eyes wander over Remus.

A scuffle was heard from the front of the room as the Wizengamot members entered the courtroom once more and took their seats. While Fudge rolled out a piece of parchment on his podium, Harry’s mind kept flashing from the present to the vision he’d just had. It had left him shaken, loathe as he was to admit it, seeing everything from Voldemort’s perspective and committing the atrocities he did, even if just for a few scant minutes.

“Mr Potter, the information you have given us has been taken into consideration,” began Fudge, “and the Wizengamot has come to the agreement that, with no concrete evidence other than the word of two underage wizards, the investigation into Mr Crouch’s death will move forward without further interruption.”

From the disgruntled expression on several of the Wizengamot members’ faces, including Dumbledore’s, Harry could tell it hadn’t been an unanimous agreement, if even a democratic one.

“Minister Fudge, with all due respect, I think you’re making a mistake. Ron and I weren’t the only ones there, so was Professor Moody and he can tell you what he saw,” fought Harry.
Several people in the Wizengamot started speaking to their neighbour after they’d heard Moody’s name, many with considering faces, but their private discussions were brought to an end by Umbridge.

“You expect us to believe that a fully qualified, world-renowned ex-Auror bore witness to such an event and didn’t lift a finger to stop it?” she raised her eyebrows challengingly. “While we appreciate your… enthusiasm… understand, Mr Potter, that this is a matter best handled by those qualified to do so. While you may not understand this now, given your… recent years’ history… the ministry follows a strict set of rules that allow it to work like a well-oiled machine when it comes to matters like these. We certainly do not need a teenage boy telling us how we should do our jobs,” she smiled.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but was beaten to it by Fudge.

“The decision has been made, Mr Potter,” Fudge stood up. “There are no further questions for our two witnesses, therefore this court is adjourned.”

Fudge waved his wand in the direction of the doors and magicked them open, he descended to the main floor and rushed out of the room with hives of reporters trailing in his shadow, screaming questions for him to answer. While the rest of the Wizengamot members took their time gathering their things, Dumbledore glided down the stairs and headed straight for Remus, engaging him in a conversation that Harry could only guess the nature of. Harry made a move to stand up and head over there, but was intercepted by Tonks’ arm across his chest and a head shake no.

“You have to stick with us,” explained Tonks. “Our job was to bring the both of you to the ministry safely, and then bring you back to school equally as safely.”

“And that means I can’t talk to Remus?” asked Harry.

“No diversions—that’s the rule,” Tonks shrugged.

“Let’s get a move on,” announced Kingsley, “we don’t want these two around—especially you, Harry—when the vultures give up on Fudge and sniff you out.”

Harry scrunched his nose at the predatory imagery, but allowed Kingsley and Tonks to lead them out of the courtroom, shooting one last peek Remus’ way before getting pulled out of sight. Although Tonks claimed Kingsley was purposefully taking a different route than the one they took to get to the courtroom, Harry could honestly say that he didn’t see a difference and resorted to sticking close to Kingsley’s side, no desire in getting lost at the ministry.

In no time at all, Harry found himself walking through the portrait hole to the Gryffindor common room, the two Aurors had proven to know how to do their jobs well and they had encountered no problems on the way back to school, being greeted and escorted by Professor McGonagall after they’d crossed the concealed gates.

He checked the clock on the wall as he threw himself on a comfy armchair and let the day’s tension drain into the soft cushions; classes were over by now and his friends were most likely making their way over to him at this very moment. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind that Gryffindors of all sizes and ages began to filter in through the entrance. Many whispered as they spotted him lounging on the couch and those that didn’t find his presence odd were soon caught up by their friend’s whispers and promptly joined in on the gawking.

“Harry! You’re back!” exclaimed Ginny, running up to him and placing a happy kiss on his lips as she plopped down on his lap. “When did you return? I didn’t think it would take this long to ask you
Harry hugged her to him as he answered, “It wouldn’t have taken so long if this toad of a woman—something Umbridge—hadn’t kept interrupting me with stupid questions,” Harry huffed. “It was almost like she was looking for a reason to make me look bad in front of the Wizengamot.”

“I’m sure she was just doing her job, otherwise what possible reason could she have to go through the trouble of making you look bad? You hadn’t even met her before.”

“Yeah, and I don’t think anyone here is related to her either so I don’t know what bone she had to pick me with me, but clearly she had some sort of problem,” Harry scowled.

“It didn’t go well then, huh?” asked Ginny, frowning as she smoothed out the furrow on Harry’s brow with her thumb.

Harry leaned into the touch and replied, “I don’t know… they seemed to believe me when Krum and I told them how we discovered Crouch’s body, but when I mentioned the thing with the giant squid they just… dismissed what I had to say.”

“That’s ridiculous!” said Ginny indignantly. “How could they just ignore something like that?”

“Unreliable and underage witnesses. Some of them turned around when I said Moody was there too, but Umbridge shut me down and Fudge sided with her,” said Harry, glowering into the distance.

Ginny let him stew in silence for a while, gently tracing his hands with her fingers, glazing over an assortment of scars and what looked like an old burn on the back of his left hand. She didn’t ask him how he got it and he didn’t offer an explanation, they simply sat in silence.

“I know it might feel like it sometimes,” Ginny hesitated, “but the world doesn’t really rest on your shoulders. This isn’t your responsibility.”

“I can’t not do anything,” said Harry, “that’s not who I am.”

“I know,” Ginny smiled, “you’re the hero with a saviour complex—you can’t deny it. Just last week you saved Gabrielle when you didn’t have to, but this is the ministry we’re talking about. You’re telling me this Umbridge woman was a pain and she didn’t even know you!”

“So what? I’m just supposed to sit here, think about the Transfiguration homework I have to finish and leave the important things to the grownups?” challenged Harry.

Ginny scowled and said, “That’s not what I meant, you prat. I just think that making enemies at the Ministry of Magic when you’re participating in a deadly tournament against your will might not be the smartest move to make.”

Harry blushed, sufficiently chastised, and turned over Ginny’s words in his head. He wasn’t blind, he knew his propensity to run towards danger instead of away from it would most likely get him killed one day, but he couldn’t stand back while someone innocent was in danger and he could do something about it. It was how he’d been raised, but not what he’d learned from it—he’d been on the other end of the stick his entire life, waiting for someone to come help him when he needed to be rescued only to have nobody show up time and time again. He’d be damned if he didn’t do something now that the shoe was in the other foot.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “You’re right, I have to focus on the tournament for now, but if the ministry hasn’t done anything by the end of the summer, then…”
“We’ll charge in, spells blazing and show them how it’s done,” Ginny assured him with an eye-roll, earning herself a peck on her cheek.

“Where are the others?” he finally thought to ask.

“Hermione and Neville had some letters to send home so they went to the Owlery, Ron was held back by Flitwick over some spellwork and Luna’s looking for her socks in the boys’ bathrooms. But I’m sure some of them will be here soon.”

“Good. I had another dream while we were in the courtroom,” he confessed. “I know now that Crouch didn’t just fall in the lake—he was murdered by one of Voldemort’s followers.”

Before Ginny could respond, the rest of the group, minus Luna, walked into the room.

“Harry! How did it go?” asked Hermione as soon as she saw him.

Catching the strained look Ron was sending Ginny’s position on his lap, Harry gently set her down on the cushions next to him and answered Hermione’s question with, “It could’ve gone better.”

“What happened?” asked Neville.

Without wasting any more time, Harry began to tell them how the case had gone, including the dream he’d had while seated in the courtroom.

“There goes any hope that he wasn’t killed,” murmured Neville.

“We knew that already,” said Ron, “this just means we finally have some proof. Though I doubt Harry can just go up to the Wizengamot and say ‘I had a dream and heard You-Know-Who admit he had someone kill Crouch so you can rule out an accident and start searching every wand in the school.’”

“You think it’s a student?” Hermione appeared horrified by the very notion. “What student would be capable of killing Crouch?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry.

“It could be a professor,” added Neville, though at Hermione’s side-eye he quickly said, “it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“You promised you’d tell Dumbledore if something like this happened again,” said Ginny. “Are you going to go talk to him?”

“He should know, there’s more he can do than any of us could,” encouraged Hermione.

“I’ll go by his office tomorrow,” promised Harry.

Their discussion of Crouch, Voldemort and the trial was pushed to the side now that they had an immediate plan set in action, so the five Gryffindors allowed themselves to enjoy the rest of their time together before dinner by playing game after game of Exploding Snap and conversing lightly in front of the common room fire.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

By the time the next day rolled around, news of the outcome of Krum and Harry’s interrogation had reached the ears of the inhabitants of Hogwarts, courtesy of one Rita Skeeter of the Daily Prophet. With two such famous faces lining the sheets of her paper, Skeeter couldn’t resist the urge to splurge
on a double feature on the two boys as she delved into their past histories and seemingly completely ignored the interrogation itself except for the first introductory paragraph in her article.

“I’m a consolation prize now?” demanded Ginny, newspaper clutched in hand and fork midway to her mouth. “Can you believe what that cow has written now?”

“I know,” added Hermione with distaste, “you would think that, after yesterday, the Daily Prophet would have more important things to talk about rather than use the interrogation as an excuse to delve into two champions’ love lives.”

“Whatcha talkin’ about?” asked Ron, stuffing eggs in his mouth mid-sentence.

“The article Rita Skeeter published today,” said Ginny, giving Harry his copy back.

“What about it?”

“It puts Hermione, Ginny, Krum and I in a weird version of a love triangle,” Harry grimaced.

“But there’s four of you,” Ron pointed out.

“Is there? I didn’t realise that before, thank you, Captain Obvious,” Ginny rolled her eyes at her brother. “It’s more of a love triangle with a little line leading from Harry to me, his second choice, while he and Krum battle for Hermione,” she frowned.

“Ignore it, Ginny. Everyone knows Harry only has eyes for you now and that there was never anything between us,” Hermione said consolingly, failing to notice as Ron frowned into his plate next to her.

“Of course there isn’t. It would be like… like trying to date a close cousin, or a sister,” Harry shuddered at the thought. “You have to ignore whatever that woman writes, there’s not a lick of truth in it.”

“I know that,” Ginny groaned, “I just hate all that stuff they say about me and you, and even Hermione, when they don’t know us at all.”

“Just think how pathetic it is of Skeeter to completely ignore actual news and make up ridiculous gossip instead,” said Hermione. “We should talk about something else—the rest of the world can fawn over Skeeter’s articles without our input. Have you talked to Dumbledore, Harry?”

“I sent him Hedwig last night and he wrote back saying to meet him today after last period,” responded Harry.

“Ugh,” groaned Ron, “last period. That’s Snape, isn’t it? That greasy git—I can’t stand another one of his lessons where he praises Goyle for not getting his tie stuck underneath his cauldron again, and then snaps at Neville for cutting his alligator tongue too thin.”

“And it wasn’t too thin,” mumbled Neville from beside Harry where he had mostly kept quiet until now.

“It’s Friday, maybe he’ll go light on us with the weekend right around the corner,” Hermione shrank back in her seat under the unimpressed stares of her friends.

Snape did not go easy on any of them that day, just like he hadn’t on any other day, and seemed determined to make his two hour lesson drag on for every second of every minute of both hours. He had begun a new topic with the class and decided to assign an excruciating thirty page reading
followed by five pages worth of questions to prove that they had understood what they’d read.

Exhausted and irritable after enduring the worst kind of torture under the hands of Severus Snape, Harry left his friends on their way to the common room and marked his own path to the headmaster’s office.

“Jellybeans,” he announced to the stone gargoyle. It stood the side and allowed him passage to the stairs.

Harry stopped at the door to Dumbledore’s office, prepared to knock and await entry, but was thrown to find the door already open a smidge, voices wafting out from the gap.

“—so you’re saying you saw nothing of what Harry described at his interrogation?” Harry heard Dumbledore question.

“Nay. If the boy saw something, then it happened before I could get down there—if at all,” said Moody, his gruff voice making it impossible to mistake him for someone else.

“Are you implying he made it all up?” asked Dumbledore. “What possible motive could the boy have to concoct such a story?”

“Perhaps the boy did see something out there: a dead raven floating on the water. A fish. Hell, maybe one of those fish people from the lake,” croaked Moody, “but when I ran into those two, there was nothing to see.”

“Very well, Alastor,” said Dumbledore. “I understand you have some papers to grade…”

Panic at being caught eavesdropping overtaking him, Harry quickly dashed down to the middle of the staircase and retook those steps, running into Moody on his way down from the office.

“Constant vigilance, Potter,” growled the man, his magical eye taking in Harry with an uncomfortable intensity.

“Yes, sir.”

The door had been left open, Harry walked into the room and turned to face the desk, startled when Dumbledore couldn’t be found sitting at his chair, fingers steepled in front of him as he offered Harry a lemon drop.

“One moment, please, Harry,” called out Dumbledore from somewhere in the office. “I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“No hurries, professor.”

Uncomfortable taking a seat in the office without Dumbledore in the room, Harry looked around.

“Hello Fawkes.”

The phoenix stood on his perch, head turned toward the sunlight coming in from the open window. He trilled when Harry ran his fingers through his feathers and affectionately clipped his fingers with his beak. The phoenix’s song had worked in calming down Harry’s nerves after the tiring afternoon he’d just had. Dumbledore’s presence, even the one felt in his absence, amongst his possessions, still had the power to comfort Harry, in spite of the somewhat difficult relationship he now shared with the headmaster.
He observed the walls of the office, skimming past the snoozing portraits of former headmasters and
dheadmistresses, recognizing the Sorting Hat where it lay completely silent and still on top of a shelf.
Underneath it, Harry witnessed, for the second time in his life since his second year, the glory of
Godric Gryffindor’s sword, its blade polished to perfection and ending on a hilt encrusted with
precious stones.

It was as he examined the weapon that he noticed a glow originating from a cabinet sitting
underneath it, it’s doors standing an edge open, allowing light to spill out from within.

Harry stole a glance at Fawkes, the only witness in the room, and walked over to the cabinet, pulling
open the doors. Inside lay a basin, runes carved on its outer surface which took turns shimmering
with magic, the inside held something the likes of which Harry had never seen before. It was grey in
colour, almost silver yet not, it swirled in the bowl out of its own volition, in random patterns which
sometimes lighted upon white strands of lightning.

He fought the urge to lean in closer to get a better look, it wouldn’t end well for him to go prodding
unknown magical objects. Determined to behave for once, Harry took out his wand to seal the doors
shut when a squawk from Fawkes startled him so bad that he tripped over the carpet on the ground.
He braced himself against the basin but his wand had landed in the substance inside, lighting upon a
strand of white which expanded to form a gaseous, black and white image of the same courtroom
Harry had been in yesterday.

He could see wizards and witches gathered on the stands, wearing the purple robes of the
Wizengamot, all of them turning expectant eyes to the back of the room, where Harry knew the door
to be, but was unable to see. He leaned down, angling his head, trying to catch a glimpse…

A strand of hair fell forward and touched the surface of the substance.

Dumbledore’s office heaved a hefty jerk—Harry was hauled forward and swallowed face-first by the
liquid in the basin…

The pain he expected from hitting the ground never came, he’d landed feet first in the centre of the
courtroom. He looked up, hoping to see the open ceiling marking his way out, but the courtroom in
the basin held true to its counterpart in the real world and Harry was met with a domed ceiling.

His brow drenched in sweat, he searched the faces of the hundreds of people in the room and
realized from their focused stares on the door that they hadn’t noticed his sudden appearance. Eyes
glossing over unfamiliar faces, Harry was startled when he was met with a few he did recognize—
looking younger than they currently were—chief among them, Dumbledore.

“Professor!” he called, running up to the man. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have looked in your
cabinet, but I swear I didn’t mean to fall in here… Professor?”

Dumbledore continued to look past Harry, even as he stood directly in his line of sight, flapping his
arms around like a madman.

A side door to the courtroom creaked open and a man holding a woman walked in, the former
wearing the same robes as the rest of the people in the room whilst the latter had a long, black dress
and small hat with a veil covering half her face. The woman’s violent sobs and cries interrupted the
silence in the chamber, her small frame shook in the man’s hold as they walked up to the top of the
stands where he took his seat on the judge’s chair and she collapsed behind him on one of her own.

Although it had been months since he had last seen the man in person, Harry still recognized the
younger face of Bartemius Crouch presiding over the courtroom, handlebar mustache scrunched up
around his scowl, eyes radiating fury as he smacked his gavel on wood.

“Bring them in.”

The front doors opened and six dementors glided in with four people, hands and feet bound, shuffling along between them. Wizards and witches in the stands murmured to each other as they stole glances at Crouch, who had stood up at the group’s arrival.

The woman behind Crouch heaved a broken breath and stuffed her fist in her mouth to muffle her crying.

The group moved to the centre of the room where four chairs materialised from the ground. The hooded monsters took their rotting, skeletal hands from underneath their tattered cloaks and wrapped them around the four people, all of whom struggled against their hold even as they visibly lost their strength under the dementors’ powers. Once their feet were shackled to the ground and their hands to their chairs, the dementors exited the premises.

Crouch cleared his throat, a darkness falling over his face as he stared at the four individuals.

“The four of you have been brought before this Council of Magical Law on accusation of crimes so evil and deplorable—”

“Father, please! Don’t do this—I didn’t do anything, I swear!” yelled one of the young men in the group, a pale looking boy with straw-like hair and blue, desperate eyes. “Tell him, mother—tell him I couldn’t possibly—”

The woman behind Crouch flinched and whimpered in her seat at the sound of her son’s pleas.

“—that this court has rarely dealt with the likes of them,” Crouch boomed over his son. “Bellatrix Lestrange—née Black—, Rabastan Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange and,” Crouch clenched his jaw, “Bartemius Crouch Jr, you are accused of having repeatedly used the Cruciatus Curse on Auror Frank Longbottom—”

“Father, I beg you! I swear, I had nothing to do with this—I’m not Dark! I would never do such a thing. You’ve got to—”

“—to extract information from him on the suspected whereabouts of the deceased He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and, when failing to do so, also tortured his wife, Alice Longbottom, to the point of insanity. Husband and wife are now currently in the care of the best Healers St Mungos has to offer, but the prognostic is bleak, if not hopeless,” Crouch’s nose flared, the knuckles of the hand holding the gavel were white and pushing against his skin.

Cries of sadness and outrage had risen up from the Wizengamot as Crouch detailed the group’s crimes. Harry felt something get stuck in his throat as the information clicked in his head, his thoughts immediately going to his friend Neville, the shy Gryffindor with an inner strength that sometimes shone through the cracks left by his insecurities.

“These acts and the confirmed alliance to the terrorist group known as Death Eaters, headed by You-Know-Who, place the prison sentence of these four individuals at sixty years in Azkaban,” Crouch paused, the courtroom held its breath. “I now move to ask the jury—”

“Mother!” the boy screamed, pulling against his chains. “Tell him I didn’t do it! You know I could never—I’m your son! Your son! Your little boy—”

The small, frail woman clapped her hands over her ears and began to rock back and forth.
“I ask the jury,” shouted Crouch, spittle flying from his mouth, “to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve nothing more, and nothing less, than a lifetime in Azkaban.”

“No!” howled the straw-haired boy. “I won’t go back! Don’t take me to the dementors—I’d rather die! Please, father…”

Every hand in the jury rose in agreement to Crouch’s verdict and he hit his gavel against the stand.

“The court has decided.”

“I didn’t do it! I didn’t do it, I didn’t know, I swear I didn’t know—please! I can’t go back! I can’t—”

The frail woman dropped from her chair in a dead faint, unbeknownst to her husband, who held firm behind his podium, looking down at his frenzied son with empty eyes.

“Jailors—take these prisoners away,” ordered Crouch, watching as the dementors drifted in once more to take the one witch and three wizards away to Azkaban, all the while Crouch’s son continued to yell, kick and plead.

“He’ll come back!” cackled the woman as the dementors dragged her away, hair equally as wild as the madness pouring out of her eyes. “My Master will return stronger than ever before! I will be rewarded for my loyalty and he will bring an end to all you filthy blood traitors! The Dark Lord will rise once more…”

Her proclamation trailed off into echoed silence as the dementors took her too far out of reach for her words to make their way back. Shaken, Harry turned his attention back to Dumbledore, who was left staring at the crazed woman with a thoughtful expression on his face before him and the courtroom surrounding them exploded in a show of dark, liquid smoke.

Harry was left reeling as his world turned on him once more and a new image appeared—he was now standing in one of Hogwarts’ many familiar halls. Dumbledore was up ahead, walking beside a younger witch who kept whispering things in his ear as he held the Daily Prophet out in front of him and read. Harry ran to catch up to the pair.

“—his wife and now this… I don’t know what will happen to that man, but he is not in his right state, let me tell you, Professor Dumbledore,” said the woman.

“I would imagine not, Bertha,” tutted Dumbledore, not taking his eyes away from the paper, “the man just lost his entire family in the span of a month and has to live with the very difficult reality that he may very well have caused one of those deaths.”

“Well, yes, of course—but I heard from Cindy down in management that her house-elf, Ditzy, ran into Mr Crouch’s house-elf, Wimpy-something or other, and she said that from her behaviour and what she said about the situation back home, that Mr Crouch truly isn’t that torn up about the death of his son so much as his wife’s… Never brought himself to forgive the boy, I say,” from the woman’s small, self-satisfied smirk Harry could tell that she enjoyed being the one to share the awful news with the professor.

“That’s enough, Ms Jorkins,” rumbled Dumbledore, causing the woman to jump at his tone and immediately adopt a demure disguise. “You came to Hogwarts to ask for my opinion on your article—a trouble that you could’ve forgone if you’d simply written me a letter—not spread distasteful gossip about the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. I recommend you pay more attention to your quotes and check over to see you’ve clearly stated who said what in order
The woman was left standing alone on the corridor, flushed crimson, as Dumbledore speed-walked ahead of her and rose up the staircase to his office, the gargoyle stepping aside automatically at the headmaster’s presence, allowing both Harry and Dumbledore entry. However, Harry came to a halt as the door to the office opened to reveal another Dumbledore standing in front of his desk, this one sparing a glance at the fake Dumbledore Harry had been following before focusing his laser sharp focus on the young wizard.

“I think that’s enough for the day, Harry, don’t you?” Dumbledore pointed his wand to the ceiling and the world shifted for the last time, landing Harry back in front of the cabinet with Fawkes curiously observing him from atop his stand.

“Prof—professor, I swear I didn't mean to look in there. I was just going to close the door but then I tripped and landed in that—thing, and you were there, but you weren't—”

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I, more than anyone, understand how strong the draw of one’s curiosity can be, therefore, I cannot fault you for falling prey to your own when I, much older and experienced that I am, constantly fall in the same trap.”

Dumbledore smiled benignly, shutting the cabinet closed and motioning for Harry to take a seat as he himself plopped down behind his oak desk.

“What was that? Those—those images of all those people—I recognized some of them,” said Harry.

“I am a very old man, Harry. As I’m sure many people have told you, I’ve been around for a very long time and over the course of that time I’ve amassed a repertoire of experiences the likes of which you can only imagine,” Dumbledore smiled. “It is sometimes…difficult to keep it all clear and straight in my mind so I resort to some outside help,” he indicated the cabinet. “This is a pensieve—a storage for my memories. All I must do is simply remove them with my wand, like so,” Dumbledore touched the tip of his wand to his temple, pulling it away slowly to reveal a gossamer strand of white light, “and drop them in the pensieve.”

“That was actually you in there then—the past version of you. All of that actually happened, they were memories,” Harry took a pause. “Crouch really sentenced his own son to Azkaban.”

Dumbledore’s eyes lost some of their sparkle, lips falling in a frown. “He did. Bartemius felt he had no choice in the matter as his son had been caught in the company of those who had committed the crime and, on top of that, he had the Dark Mark on his arm. Family relations aside, Bartemius felt it was his duty as Minister of Magic to punish all those who broke the law and yes, that included his very own son, unfortunately.”

“His crimes though—what Crouch said he did to those people—those were Neville’s parents, weren’t they?” asked Harry, fearing the answer that he already knew to be true deep in his bones.

Dumbledore levelled Harry with a very sharp look. “Neville never told his friends why he’s being raised by his grandmother?”

Disconcerted by the professor’s sudden change in mood, Harry answered, “No sir. I mean, I knew already because Sirius told me, but… I guess seeing it sort of happen with my own eyes is something entirely different. I think the others just think his parents were killed during the war—like mine were —since Neville hasn’t told anyone anything.”

Dumbledore looked away and said, “Yes, those were Neville’s parents that Mr Crouch was talking
Neither Harry nor Dumbledore spoke for some time. The headmaster was staring out the window, eyes fixed on a point in time that Harry could not see though, judging by his stooped shoulders and wary face, he would say that it was not good memories that Dumbledore was revisiting.

“Professor,” Harry finally broke the silence, “I came here because I have something to share with you.”

“Yes, of course, Harry. We got sidetracked before, but please, continue,” he motioned for Harry to begin and he did; he told Dumbledore everything he could remember about the vision he had in the courtroom, the link to Crouch’s death and the possible unwilling involvement of Bertha Jorkins in the plot to place Harry in the tournament.

By the end of his tale, Harry thought that he had never seen Dumbledore look more his age than he did at that very moment, slumping back in his chair and staring vacantly in Harry’s general direction, the only sign that he was listening to a word he said was hidden in the mounting wrinkles forming on his face.

“Asking one person to go through a war is bad enough, asking them to go through four is just downright rude,” muttered Dumbledore with a humourless chuckle. “It is as we feared and knew for quite some time: Voldemort is gaining more strength as the days pass and soon, he will rise back to power to finish what he started.”

“The visions… do you think they have anything to do with the prophecy? Why can I suddenly see into Voldemort’s head? At first, I could just see around him, but now… it’s like I’m him,” Harry broke off, unable to say anymore for fear that he’d say too much.

“I have a theory,” Dumbledore admitted grudgingly, “that Voldemort did not merely disappear on that fated night many years ago. I believe his spirit was forced from his body—similar to what happened with Professor Quirrel—because of the Killing Curse and that, inadvertently, it had far reaching consequences that no one could have possibly predicted,” Dumbledore straightened himself out and met Harry’s eyes squarely. “It is my belief that a piece of Voldemort broke off in that moment and latched onto the only living thing in the room.”

Harry didn’t need Dumbledore to continue to know what he meant. He raised a shaky hand to the scar on his forehead, clamping down the need to hurl at the thought that he’d had a piece of that monster possibly living inside of him since he was a baby.

“You—I—I can’t—this can’t be happening,” Harry gasped.

“If it had not been for our last talk in this very room, I would not have told you my suspicions just yet,” Dumbledore said softly. “There never would have been a good time to do it, but perhaps a better way would have been found… Of course, my wish would be that this was not necessary at all… Would you rather I not have told you?”

Harry took a moment to think about it. “No,” he decided, “I—I hate it. I hate it so much I want to burn this bloody scar right off my face with battery acid, but if I hadn’t known and the visions kept on coming… I don’t know how I would’ve been able to deal with it. I would’ve thought I was going crazy for sure, or turning into him.”

Dumbledore allowed Harry a few minutes of silence to process the news, carefully watching the teen’s every move in case it looked like one of Madam Pomfrey’s Calming Draughts would need to be brought into play.
“We have seen, that as Voldemort gets stronger, your connection grows as well. I understand that over the summer you were taught Occlumency,” he waited for Harry’s nod, “and, I suspect, that will help a great deal when it comes to resisting and controlling the pull of the connection. If you are willing to consider it, I would like to test your barriers myself sometime over the summer, when we will have more time to work on fine tuning your weaknesses and improving your strengths.”

Although still dazed from the unwelcome and shocking news, Harry felt grateful for the headmaster’s suggestion and was quick to signal his agreement. However, with the revelation still fresh in his memory, all Harry could think of was escaping the office, which now felt like it was pressing on him from all sides, and run to the nearest abandoned classroom where he would be allowed to gather his thoughts in peace and scream where nobody would hear.

“Professor, I’m sorry to leave like this, but I have to go. I have… stuff to do,” Harry hastily pushed himself off the chair and was already at the door when Dumbledore spoke.

“I would just like to leave you with one more thing to think on as you leave: these past months, you’ve had these visions of Voldemort in your head, you’ve felt what he felt and saw what he saw, you’ve gotten closer to him than anyone else ever could before. In that time, you attended classes at school, spent time with your friends, corresponded with loved ones and nurtured new relationships,” Dumbledore stood up from his chair and made his way around the desk, stopping mere feet away from Harry.

“This does not change who you are. It does not alter what you believe in, who you’ve become over these years or how you choose to feel. Voldemort can do many things, Harry, but only you have the power to decide whether one of them is distorting the very foundations of who you are. Remember that.”
“These are truly ingenious,” said Hermione, holding up a blue disk the size of a hockey put. “And you two made these all on your own? How did you manage it?”

The Weasley twins grinned at each other from across the desks they were sitting at, it was an late May weekend at Hogwarts and whilst everyone else was busy revising for their upcoming exams, Hermione, Neville, Harry and the four Weasleys were occupying an abandoned classroom on the fourth floor.

“Surprised you, have we?” smirked George. “Didn’t think we had it in us, she did, oh brother mine.”

“She did not, my handsome twin,” Fred responded. “But alas, here we are, proving the most brilliant witch of her age wrong. How does it feel, Hermione? This one’s for our future autobiographer, mind you, so make it memorable.”

George waved his wand in a complicated pattern and an old-fashioned microphone, the likes of which Harry had only ever seen on television, appeared mid-air, nudging its way closer to Hermione’s face.

Hermione scowled. “I’ll admit,” she said, reluctantly, “I clearly underestimated the two of you if you could come up with something like this in just a few weeks.”

“How does it work, exactly?” asked Neville, sitting on the ledge of a widow.

“I am so glad you asked,” said George, “you see, we know every rule in the triwizard handbook—had to study it carefully when we wanted to add our names to the bunch—and that’s how we knew exactly what our first client here, Mr Potter, would require to sneak past those pesky little spells and charms at the start of every task.”

“We knew we couldn’t just create the first thing that came to mind, like we normally would,” continued Fred, relating their tale to a captive audience, “so we asked ourselves: how can we create something magical that wouldn’t trip up any of the magic sensors surrounding the area? And that’s when we came up with these little gems,” he pulled out a bag full of the same odd object that Hermione was currently, only some were different colours.

“Are you saying you made these without using magic?” asked an incredulous Ginny.

“You just grabbed a couple of pebbles and painted them different, didn’t you?” Ron raised a sceptic eyebrow, eyeing the twins’ bag full of goodies with nothing short of distrust.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Harry said to Ron, then turned to the twins, “right?”

The twins grasped at their hearts with their hands.

“I cannot believe you would think so lowly of us, brother mine. We share blood, you and I,” gasped George.

At Ron and Ginny’s eye-rolls, Fred and George adopted more serious faces and Fred said, “This isn’t a joke, we really did make these to help Harry in the last task and yes, of course we had to use magic to make these. How is he supposed to stand a chance against magical monsters without using magic?”
“We used the same method that the ministry employs when they make portkeys,” explained George. “It was difficult, at first, because we didn’t have anything to work off from, but once we managed to get our hands on an actual portkey—”

“Hang on,” Hermione’s hands rose up in protest, “you managed to get a hold of an actual portkey? You didn’t steal one, did you?”

Fred scoffed. “Of course not. Someone owes us a huge debt and this is just one of the many ways that he—”

“Or she,” said George.

“—is repaying us in due time. This person knows not to mess with the Weasley twins,” the brothers shared mischievous smirks, “but there are other ways to honour a bet other than gold—although, that will come soon enough as well.”

The five Gryffindors shared uneasy looks over the twins’ heads as they thought of the trouble the twins could get into if they were ever found out to be blackmailing a ministry employee, for they knew exactly who the twins were talking about. Harry, in particular, worried that Fred and George had just entered into a situation where they didn’t stand a chance of winning back what they’d already lost.

“Anyways,” drawled George, “once we had the portkey in our possession, all we had to do was pick it apart, spell by spell, charm by charm and potion by potion, to see what lay underneath the stinky old boot.”

“There were a few… incidents,” admitted Fred, looking thoughtful as he scratched his chin, “we probably shouldn’t have left them lying around the room after we’d had our fun with them. Who knows where that house-elf wound up… But the past is the past, all we can do now is admit that mistakes were made.”

“Why did you use portkeys?” asked Neville. “I don’t understand the connection when you were supposed to make something to help Harry in the Tournament.”

“Portkeys are always regular Muggle objects that will pass from being noticed by the occasional wanderer. What makes them so special is that, while they are filled to the literal brim with magic, they don’t actually show up as a magical object unless you specifically cast the one spell capable of detecting portkeys,” said Fred.

“It wouldn’t make sense for the Tournament to have portkey wards or detection spells in place—it wouldn’t be any use to a single champion since they’d have to know the exact location of where they want to go and, other than the first task where the destination was rather clear,” George laughed, “it’s the champions’ jobs to figure out where they have to go.”

“These aren’t portkeys,” Fred gestured the item Hermione still held in her hand, “but that’s exactly what they would seem to be if anybody were bothered to look.”

“You’ve masked the true use of your invention under the guise of a portkey,” Harry realized, “like those Russian dolls where you have to pull the layers apart until you reach the smallest one in the middle.”

Although the rest of the group looked at Harry in confusion, Hermione seemed to have understood and studied the object in her hand more closely.

“That’s all great and everything,” said Ron. “A lesson for everyone—but how do they work? And
what do they do?”

“This group asks the best questions, don’t they, George?” asked Fred.

“Indeed they do, Fred.”

“This one,” Fred picked up a red disk, “is used as a distraction, a means to escape, if you will. Tap your wand to it, throw it at whatever it is that’s about to kill you and that thing or person will immediately be surrounded by a flock of ravens which, when they bite, they release a special little mixture we invented from crossing several poisonous plants and animals. It only lasts for about a minute though, so make it a quick escape.”

Harry grasped the disk cautiously, “All I have to do is tap it with my wand and it’ll do all that?”

“The birds will be immediately attracted to the closest living object it was hurled at and to make it quick, we made it so that you only need your wand to send a small amount of starter magic that would trigger the real fun,” said George.

“Show me what else you have,” said Harry.

The seven Gryffindor students spent an entire afternoon going over the twins’ inventions, becoming more and more impressed as they discovered the true extent of Fred and George’s efforts when put to the test. Not only had they invented ingenious little traps like the first one they’d shown the group, they’d also managed to somehow bottle up certain advanced spells that Harry hadn’t been able to master on his own, but which would prove extremely useful no matter what the judges may throw at him next.

Harry resolved that he’d find a way to make it up to the twins once he got the entire Tournament business out of the way.

It had been about three months since the second task and even less time since Harry’s call to the witness stand at the Wizengamot and his following conversation with Dumbledore. Although he’d told his friends of the headmaster’s agreement with their theory on Voldemort’s return, he had yet to mention to anyone what he’d revealed afterwards—the true meaning of his connection to the Dark Lord.

Harry had debated with himself intensely about it—he had to tell someone, anyone, before the shocking reality threatened to overwhelm him more than it already had, but he couldn’t find that trademark Gryffindor courage to come out with the truth already. Of everyone in his inner circle, he thought he’d at least have the presence of mind to tell Sirius and Remus, but so far he’d had four more conversations with the pair and in none of them had he even come close.

At the moment, Harry was walking down a hall with Hermione, Neville and Ginny at his side, Ron had been held back for detention with Professor Snape after letting one of his scathing comments travel a bit higher than a whisper. Not even the possibility of Ron cleaning out bobotubber pus from the bottom of a cauldron could distract Harry from his recurring dilemma.

“What’s wrong?” whispered Ginny, using his arm as leverage to get a closer look at his face whilst their friends walked on ahead of them. “You’ve been so distracted lately and I’m not the only one to have noticed, you know. And don’t think I don’t know this has something to do with that talk you had with Dumbledore those months ago,” said Ginny, “I’d never seen you looking so pale and sickly after talking to the headmaster.”

“It—it’s nothing, I’m fi—”
“Don’t say fine,” she warned, “we’ve only been together for a little while, but we’ve been friends for longer and already I’m getting sick and tired of you saying you’re ‘fine’,” she used air-quotes to push her point across, “when you’re clearly not.”

Harry sighed. “Alright, maybe I do have something on my mind, but now’s not the time to go talking about it.”

“Then when is?”

“I promise, once the Tournament is over,” Harry swallowed nervously, “I’ll tell you everything, but right now… I’m just trying to deal with one thing at a time, alright?”

Ginny’s face softened at her boyfriend’s sincere confession. She knew it had been a difficult year for him—for everyone, really, as they were forced to help their friend battle unspeakable tasks for a competition that he was meant to be enjoying from the sidelines like every other kid in his year.

“Alright,” she said. “I just worry about you sometimes,”—Harry shot her a look—“okay, a lot of the time, but I have good reason to do it. If you weren’t so damn stubborn and hell bent on sparing your poor, delicate friends your troubles then I wouldn’t have to worry.”

Harry grimaced, bringing Ginny close with the arm he had around her waist and placing an affectionate kiss on her forehead. “I think it’s the Weasley in you and I’d go so far as to say that even your brothers share that trait,” he said. “You knew what you were getting into though, so don’t come complaining to me if the product is faulty.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and replied, “You’re stupid if you think there’s something wrong with you just because you’re a fourteen-year-old boy who doesn’t like sharing his feelings. Doesn’t mean it can’t be trained out of you with the right tools.”

Harry chanced a glance ahead of them, saw Hermione and Neville making their way around the corner, and pulled Ginny into a hidden alcove behind an old tapestry.

“I’d like to see you try, Weasley,” he challenged her, backing her up against the wall, holding her in place with the weight of his own body against hers.

“I accept that challenge, Potter.”

Their lips locked together, her arms going around his neck to pull his hulking form down whilst his own arm remained locked around her waist, squeezing her tight against him as the other hand sneaked its way around, up her back and into her hair. They stayed that way, embraced in each other’s arms, tilting their heads at different angles and only breaking away when breathing became absolutely necessary, but even then their lips wouldn’t stray far from each other’s skin.

“Really, you two, you’re lucky Ron’s stuck in detention and wasn’t here to catch you like this,” said Neville as he pulled the tapestry aside to reveal the dishevelled pair.

“I agree with Neville,” added Hermione, arms crossed against her chest whilst she tapped her foot on the floor impatiently, “the Hogwarts halls are no place to engage in such… pastimes. Show some restraint.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Ginny, disentangling herself from Harry’s hold and righting her clothes. “Don’t think I didn’t see you liplocked to Krum behind the bookshelves last Saturday.”

Hermione’s cheeks flamed red and she stuttered, “Wha—No, I—I wasn’t, I mean, we weren’t—”
“How about we call it even then?” suggested Harry, much to Ginny and Neville’s amusement.

“Fine,” Hermione replied curtly, pivoting on her heel and walking off.

Harry, Ginny and Neville shared one last laugh before they hurried on after her, catching up to a rosy-cheeked Hermione who refused to look any one of them in the eye, staring headfastedly forward. They were passing by a window overlooking the Hogwarts grounds and the sound of snickering and a curious buzzing made its way up to them. Harry stole a look out the window and stopped in his tracks.

“What’s Malfoy doing over there?” he asked, gesturing his friends to come closer.

“It looks like he’s… whispering into his hand?” said Neville, tilting his head puzzlingly as Draco Malfoy stood next to a tree, hands cupped together near his shoulder and close to his mouth whilst his lips kept moving, forming words that only his lackeys, Crabbe and Goyle, could hear as they stood a few feet away, looking in different directions.

“Is he trying some sort of spell?” asked Ginny.

“He’s not,” Hermione replied, “he’d need to have his wand in his hand and you can see it from here, sticking out of his pocket.”

“He kinda looks like he’s talking on a walkie-talkie, like the kind Dudley used to have,” said Harry.

“We both know those wouldn’t work within these walls,” Hermione said shortly. “Come on, we better leave those three to it and go find Ron, we promised him we wouldn’t go to dinner without him.”

-BREAK-BREAK-BREAK-BREAK-BREAK-

Breakfast on the morning of the third task was a rowdy event in the great hall. Normally the noisiest of the four houses, Gryffindors weren’t the only ones that could be heard yelling excitedly across their food at each other as they discussed the four champions’ strengths and weaknesses and placed their bets on who would win the final prize. Worst of all, Harry detected an underlying theme in the bets being placed.

“They don’t know what they’re saying, Harry,” Ginny told him, grasping his cold hand in hers, “you have as much a chance of winning this as any of the other three and you’ve proved it to everyone time and time again.”

“Yeah, mate, they have no idea how much you’ve been busting your ass off preparing for this thing and just think,” Ron leaned in closer, lowering his voice, “you have the twins’ surprise up your sleeve and they don’t know shit about that.”

“Ronald! For Merlin’s sake, language!” huffed Hermione.

“He’s right though, Hermione. Harry will do great,” Neville smiled encouragingly at him.

The noise level in the great hall rose as the morning mail began to trickle in from the ceiling, owl after owl performing a choreographed routine only they could follow, each going their separate ways in search for their recipient. Harry caught a glimpse of his own face staring back at him in black and white from the talons of a dark brown owl carrying the Daily Prophet, Hedwig trailing right after it.

The snowy white owl landed softly on Harry’s shoulder, the newspaper hitting him in the back as she nuzzled her feathered head against his neck.
“Hello there,” said Harry. “If this is your way of softening the blow of more bad news, then I feel I must tell you, I’m going to share my bacon with you anyway.”

Hedwig continued to rub her head against Harry, but accepted his offer of bacon and allowed him to remove the parcel from her leg. Shaking the newspaper open, Harry skipped his moving portrait and continued on to read the article below.

“Another load of rubbish from the Daily Prophet’s fraud of a correspondent,” sniped Hermione, ripping out the page from her own copy and crunching it up into a tiny ball which she then set fire to.

“I wasn’t expecting much different,” Harry admitted, “at least this time she’s not implying I’m about to start a harem.”

Ron growled. “There has to be something we can do about this woman. She hasn’t written anything new here—just a load of gossip about your love life and some more speculation about the Crouch trial—but some of the stuff she’s said before is actually true.”

“I can’t imagine where she’s getting her information from,” Neville jumped in, “it’s not like people want their dirty laundry aired out in the open for everyone to see so who would be stupid enough to trust Skeeter with anything?”

“Maybe she’s pulling a Lockhart,” Ginny suggested. “She tricks people into telling her their secrets and then obliterates them before they realize what they’ve done.”

The group fell silent, thinking over Ginny’s proposal.

“It wouldn’t work,” Hermione finally decided, “it wasn’t the same with Lockhart—he targeted people who had gone off on their own and didn’t want any recognition, so no one knew better than to believe his stories—, but Skeeter talks about people everyone knows, like Dumbledore and Harry. I doubt the authorities wouldn’t notice a link between a sudden influx of celebrities complaining from memory loss and Skeeter’s articles.”

Hermione was about to say more on the subject, but was interrupted by a clearing of a throat. Professor McGonagall stood behind Harry, looking down on the group from the top of her glasses, pursing her lips as she did so.

“Apologies, Ms Granger, I seem to have interrupted you mid-thought,” —Hermione blushed— “but I shan’t be long. I just need to share a quick announcement with our champion here,” she turned her attention to Harry. “Potter, seeing as how you’re excused from all your exams this year, instead of accompanying your friends to theirs, you are required in the chamber off the side from the great hall after breakfast.”

“But the third task isn’t until tonight!” Harry protested.

“This is merely one of the formalities performed before the task,” McGonagall assured him. “You will be meeting any friends and relatives coming to watch the event.”

“I—I suppose that’s alright,” said Harry, wondering who exactly McGonagall expected to show up when Sirius was on the run, Remus was hiding away with him and the Dursleys wouldn’t be caught dead in the magical school, not to mention that they were the last people Harry wanted to see.

“If I do not see you before tonight, then I wish you good luck on your third task, Potter,” McGonagall offered him one of her rare smiles and then sauntered off.

“Can’t possible imagine what they’d want me there for,” muttered Harry, “it’s not like the Dursleys
are any likely to show up—not that I’d want them to.”

“For such a smart guy, Harry, you can be incredibly dim sometimes, you know,” Ginny said lightly, “but it’s alright, I like you anyway.”

Ron and Neville snickered at him and Hermione rolled her eyes.

After breakfast, Harry did as bid and walked up to the same chamber he’d been led to after his name had come out of the Goblet. Upon entering the room, he was immediately taken up into someone’s arms, lungs being squeezed to an inch of their lives and his face submerged in a forest of ginger hair.

“Oh, Harry, dear! It is so good to see you! You have no idea how worried I’ve been,” Mrs Weasley held him at arm’s length, scrunching up her face at whatever she saw. “Arthur couldn’t make it this morning, I’m afraid, but he’ll be here in time for the end of the Tournament tonight and so will Bill and Charlie—I know you haven’t met them yet, but no time like the present. Charlie was already here, but once Bill heard of the Tournament, he decided to come along as well.”

“Mrs Weasley, you didn’t have to go to all this trouble,” mumbled Harry, mortified that the Weasley matriarch had gone to such lengths for him.

“It’s no trouble at all, dear, you know that—you’re family,” she said, patting his cheek with a warm hand.

“I hope I’m not interrupting, but I was hoping to have a little time to congratulate the young champion myself.”

At the sound of Remus’ voice, Harry looked past Mrs Weasley and locked eyes with his former professor turned honorary uncle. It wasn’t until the older man took him up in a hug of his own that Harry became aware of the tension he’d been carrying inside him.

“It’s good to see and actually be able to talk to you, cub,” whispered Remus before pulling himself away. “However, I think I have someone here who is even more excited to be seeing you.”

“Wha—”

Harry’s question was cut short when a black furred blur collided with the middle of his chest, pushing him down to the ground to lather his face and neck in drool. The over-excited animagus on top of him barked and wagged his tail, staring down at Harry from his position sitting atop his chest.

“Padfoot! You shouldn’t be here,” Harry said reluctantly. “You know the risks, if anyone from the ministry were to see you—”

“They would only spare him a cursory glance of curiosity and then move on to more interesting sights once they discover that he’s been allowed on the grounds under the express permission of the headmaster himself,” finished Remus, pulling Padfoot off Harry by the nape of his neck.

“Dumbledore knows you’re here? And he’s okay with it?” asked Harry, feeling a bubble of hope rise up in his stomach.

“He was the one to suggest it,” said Remus.

Not finding any words with which to respond to that, Harry simply nodded and bent down to allow Padfoot to wiggle his way into his arms, sniffing and bumping his head against Harry’s chest in shared affection.
“Who’s that you have with you, Harry?” asked Mrs Weasley, small smile stretching across her lips as she watched the love Harry openly shared with his new companion.

“Oh, Mrs Weasley, this is Padfoot, my… dog. Mr Lupin—Remus—got him for me this summer when I stayed with him for a few weeks,” Harry explained as Sirius played the part of a normal dog and approached Mrs Weasley’s outstretched hand cautiously. “You might remember that he was our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher last year, but he was also friend with my parents when they were all in school.”

“Very close friends, in fact,” added Remus, shaking hands with Mrs Weasley, “you would’ve been hard-pressed to find any one of us alone—we were always in each other’s company. Looking back on it now, I fear we thought we were the ‘cool kids’ when, in fact, we were closer to being the school geeks—barring a few exceptions, of course.”

To Harry’s astonishment, Remus proceeded to wink at Mrs Weasley, the latter of which let out an unheard of titter and brought a hand to her warming cheeks. Padfoot let out a bark and wiggled his tail in the air, bounding off to the door where he proceeded to scratch and wine against the wood.

“I think that means someone wants to be let out,” said Mrs Weasley. “Harry, dear, why don’t you show the Mr Lupin—”

“Remus, please, Mrs Weasley.”

Mrs Weasley let another giggle escape.

“Remus, then. Why don’t you show Remus and I the rest of the school, Harry? I don’t know about him, but it’s been awhile since I last walked these corridors.”

Needing no further prompting, Harry led the way out of the room and into the empty great hall. He spent until six o’clock that afternoon showing his entourage around the castle, barely holding back his smirks when Sirius would sniff around the hidden passages only the Marauders, the Weasley twins—and now Harry’s friends—knew about. He showed them the Durmstrang ship, the Beauxbaton carriage, the Quidditch pitch and the Whomping Willow which hid the passageway to the Shrieking Shack.

“Oh my!” Mrs Weasley exclaimed as Padfoot ventured a bit too close to the tree for its liking and swung a branch at the offending animagus. “I’ve heard about this tree so many times before—especially from the twins—but I’d never actually seen it in real life.”

“Ah yes, it must’ve been around the time you left school when they decided to plant it here,” commented Remus.

“To the last day,” agreed Mrs Weasley. “How vexed Arthur was that he didn’t get to see it, he’ll be even more so once he hears about this little excursion of ours.”

They continued walking the grounds of the school until Harry had nothing more to show them outside, so they ventured in just in time to join the rest of the school for dinner.

“Mum!” shouted Ginny, jumping up from her seat and running to give her mother a hug. “You made it! But where are Bill and dad? I thought they were coming along as well.”

“Wait, you knew they were coming?” asked Harry.

“Who do you think was there to answer mum’s letter when she heard about this ‘family of the champions’ business?” she quirked an eyebrow.
“I’m afraid they couldn’t make it, dear, but they promised to be there for the Tournament,” said Mrs Weasley.

The rest of the Weasley children greeted their mother in much the same fashion to a chorus of “Mum!” and “We swear we didn’t mean to give him an extra nose, it was just supposed to turn his hair green”. In no time at all, Mrs Weasley had managed to charm the entire Gryffindor table with her mothering love and was last seen by Harry in the midst of an amusing conversation with the twins and Lee Jordan.

Thankfully, Remus’s arrival—Professor Lupin’s to everyone else—was met with only a few cursory interrogations as to his being there and most people seemed content with the simple explanation that he was a friend of Harry’s parents who had later sought him out to regain a small piece of his long-lost friends. The star of the show, however, was Padfoot, the friendliest dog to have ever graced the halls of Hogwarts and who delighted in making first years laugh and chased after whatever kids would throw for him only to later bring it back diligently.

Harry was having such a nice time talking to the Weasleys and Remus and watching Padfoot prance around the school in happier tones than he’d ever seen on him as a human, that he almost the reason for their all being brought together. Jeers and clapping from the Hufflepuff table efficiently broke through that charade as Cedric was pushed to his feet by his friends and given a hero’s farewell out the door. His retreating form was soon followed by a more sedate Fleur, adjusting the little blue hat on her head delicately before rising from her seat with her head held high and gliding down the same path Cedric had taken. Feeling sick to his stomach, Harry couldn’t bear to watch as Krum then followed in her footsteps and was merely treated to the sounds of hands slapping on tables, stomping feet and whistling cheers when he turned his gaze away.

“I guess this is it,” Ron mumbled.

“Yeah.”

Dozens of pairs of eyes turned their attention to him as Harry stood up and chanced a look at his friends and family gathered around the table. He didn’t know what to say… should he make a speech? Was he supposed to prepare something beforehand? Was there no handbook at hand for what to say when you were unwillingly and illegally thrust into a deadly competition and then had to say your (quite possibly last) goodbyes to everyone you’ve ever cared about?

If he made it out alive, maybe Harry would get down to writing that first draft himself.

His awkwardness must have blatantly obvious for Mrs Weasley merely sent him a half-pitying, half-fond look before wrapping him up in her arms and squeezing the stuffing out of him. The rest of the table took their cue from her and Harry was treated to a multitude of pats on the back, kisses on the cheek, warm hugs and encouraging thumbs up from the twins.

He was soon striding out of the castle and down to the makeshift maze that had been arduously planted and cared for by Madam Sprout—much to the dismay of every Quidditch player in the school. Upon reaching the disgraced Quidditch pitch, Harry was greeted by the other three champions and the five judges, including Minister Fudge, the man who Harry remembered hearing was filling in for the deceased Crouch.

Heart in his throat and sweat beading on his head and dripping down his face into his eyes, Harry forced himself to get his hands to stop shaking and his ears to stop ringing long enough to hear whatever it was that the judges were saying.

He had no such luck as no sooner had that thought crossed his mind that he was being pushed into a
large tent with the rest of the champions. He spotted the twin bunk beds at one end and immediately headed for one, laying down on the soft mattress and recalling every single meditation exercise he could think of.

Once he felt that he was no longer in any immediate danger of throwing up from nerves, he took to observing the other occupants in the tent. Fleur was sitting on a low chair in front of a magical fireplace, staring off into the flickering flames with unseeing eyes whilst playing with a pendant hanging around her neck. Krum, in comparison, was moving all around the place, striding from wall to wall, momentarily pausing his stride to clench his hands into fists and battle off an invisible enemy with a couple of punches, coming out of his fighting stance with a few hasty jumps on the balls of his feet before resuming his pacing. By the flaps that made up the door, Cedric stood with a hand holding the fabric apart as he peered out, his teeth biting through his bottom lip as his face paled to three shades lighter than his normal colour.

The clamour of stomping feet and excited voices began to drift in through the open door, at which point Cedric hastily abandoned his post to sit on the edge of the bottom bed next to Harry’s, hands gripping his hair while he mumbled unintelligible words to himself. Bagman’s booming exclamations joined the noise from outside and, as though hearing the same unspoken command, all four champions simultaneously dropped whatever it was they were doing and lined up by the door.

Harry instinctively reached for his wand and the gifts the twins had imparted upon him on his departure, all shrunk to the size of coins and deposited in different pockets in his cargo pants (Neville’s idea) depending on their function. With an extra strong burst of screaming and cheering, the flaps to the tent were thrown open and the four champions were immediately swathed in a bright white light.

Fleur was the first to react from the sudden shock, she brought up a hand to shield her eyes from the glare and marched out, blowing kisses and waving to a delighted crowd, as though she’d been born to play the role of champion.

The boys followed at a more sedate pace, but they were clearly taking a page out of Fleur’s book with their stilted waving and stiff smiles.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I’ve said it before, but let me say it again: Welcome to the final task of the Triwizard Tournament!” Bagman took a moment to allow the ruckus to die down. “In this final test, our four champions will head out into this specially-made maze full of mysteries and dangers to conquer their last challenge. The champion with the most points will head out first, then the one with the second most will head out one minute after and so forth—the first champion to reach the Triwizard Cup”—Bagman used his wand to levitate said cup in the middle of the stadium to the aww’s and ooh’s of the crowd—“will be the declared the winner!”

Professor Moody was suddenly standing in front of the four champions while Bagman continued to run his speech. He looked each champion up and down, his magical eye twitching and flicking back and forth as it lingered on seemingly random places, appearing to linger slightly longer on Harry than the rest. The youngest champion resisted the urge to shift on the spot, the twins’ gifts weighing heavier in his pockets and resolutely stared at the wizard’s inexplicably blurred face.

“Follow me,” growled Moody, pivoting on his wooden leg to limp ahead of them.

The four students followed at a more sedate pace. The ex-Auror led them to four different points along the wall of the maze, wordlessly depositing them until it was Harry’s turn to come to a halt.

The youngest champion tensed as Moody leaned in uncomfortably close to the point that he could feel the older man’s puffed breath shift the hairs on his neck.
“Good luck to you, Potter. Remember, the north star will always guide you true.”

With that less than cryptic message, Moody stomped off towards the stands, leaving Harry reeling at the professor’s intention in revealing this information to him.

Harry heaved in a deep breath and pushed the professor’s weird behaviour to the side. He took out his wand and looked down the line of champions, his ears rang with nerves and the shrieks of the audience. Distantly, he heard the muffled pop of magical shot being fired and observed Cedric visibly steel himself before marching into the maze. Exactly sixty counts later, another shot rang out and the shrubbery in front of Harry twisted and knotted itself into an opening.

He ran in.

The plants formed themselves into a wall the moment he emerged on the other side, blocking all the light and noise from the Quidditch pitch turned stadium until all Harry could hear was his laboured breathing echoing in the darkness. A muttered, “Lumos,” and the tip of his wand lit, providing him with enough light to see a couple of metres in front of himself. On a hunch, he took the first turn to the left and followed the path set out for him, he was forced to trace back his steps a few times when he reached a dead end and eventually thought of using a Point-Me spell to head north.

He was coming out of another dead end and returning back to where he’d come from when he heard it, a click-click-clack of nails hitting brushing against rock coming from somewhere to his right.

Harry retreated back into the path leading to the dead end and hid behind the wall of ivy, poking his head around the bend and tensing his muscles as he strained to listen for whatever was coming for him.

The noises grew closer.

The sound of gravel being pushed around the floor soon joined the click-click-clack. It sounded like someone was dragging a heavy bag along the floor—a really large and heavy bag from the noise it was making. He glanced around the corner once more and all the breath left his body at the sight before him.

It was like nothing he’d ever seen before. A creature—a monster—the length of an average-sized car and as tall as the towering plant walls. It had a segmented body the shape of a caterpillar’s cocoon encased in what appeared to be layers of protective skin that shone silver in the moonlight, six long legs sprouted from the middle of its back and reached the ground at a sharp angle, claws at the end of each leg making the sharp clicks that had announced its arrival. Its head was mounted at the start of its elongated body, hanging down between its legs—it had four eyes, two of which stretched like purple visors around the sides of his head and the other two were of similar shape, but smaller, located below the first. From where Harry was standing, he could only barely make out the seam for where its mouth should’ve been, but wasn’t able to detect if he’d have teeth to worry about as well.

Harry let out a shake exhale and the creature’s head snapped in his direction, it’s spindly legs twitched once, then twice, before it let out a dangerous growl and began to descend on Harry’s hiding spot in measured steps. Taking a moment to assess his situation, Harry quickly determined that the only way out of this was to fight the horrific beast advancing on him. There was literally a monster standing between him and his escape route, his only other choice being waiting in this dead end path for his demise.

He jumped out from behind the wall and barely allowed himself a glance at the creature before yelling, “Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus! Impedimenta!”.
The spells shot out of his wand in flashes of potent light, only to bounce off the beast’s protective hide. The monster didn’t even flinch from the onslaught of spells and seemed to mock Harry with its chilling gaze as it continued to drag itself closer.

“Glacius! Glacius! Glacius!”

Seeing as how he wasn’t going to get anywhere with the creature’s body, Harry aimed the freezing spell at its legs, hoping that if he could anchor it to the ground long enough, make him stand still, then maybe he’d have a chance of penetrating its protective skin.

The charm worked and the monster stumbled on itself as half if its legs became stuck to the ground—it howled a deafening sound and struggled to break free. Harry began to aim different spells at its bulbous body, each one angering the beast further and making no headway.

At last, the thing broke free from its frozen shackles and reared back on its two hind legs, its body now perpendicular to the ground as the remaining four appendages clawed at the air. The seam of its mouth opened wide, showcasing rows upon rows of deadly sharp teeth shaped like a shark’s, one on top of the other, and it roared at Harry, black coloured spittle flying out.

Harry grasped the opportunity he was granted with both hands and aimed Cutting Curses at the belly of the beast, watching in awe as gashes appeared on its body and bled down on the ground. The monster stumbled back with a pained shriek. It fell back on its six legs and charged at Harry. His moment of elation was over as quickly as it began and Harry barely had enough time to conjure up a Shield Charm before the monster hit it head on, pushing him off his feet with the force of the hit and propelling him across the air through one of the maze’s walls.

The breath knocked out him as he crashed on his back, Harry fought against the burning in his back and lungs and scrambled out of the way of the monster’s continued path, one if its legs missing him by millimetres as it careened past him.

Harry rolled onto his hands and feet, eyes darting around the ground for his wand. He spotted it lying mere feet away from the recovered monster, already preparing to charge at him once more. Thinking fast, Harry formulated the only plan he could think of to get to his wand and waited for the beast to come at him. As it did, Harry jumped to his feet and instead of running away like he probably should have done, he raced headlong towards the rushing animal.

The thing didn’t even pause in its advance and opened it mouth wide as it approached Harry, a forked tongue slithering out to lick along its teeth as the wizard drew ever closer. However, at the last possible moment, Harry ducked down and rolled underneath it, coming up on the other side to snatch up his wand and twirl around in time to witness the creature turn to face him and stand up on its hind legs once more.

This time, the ends of its moving legs opened up, the claws retracted and a kind of projectile shot out at Harry, who had to duck out of the way and deflect them with hasty jets of unfiltered magic firing out of his wand.

“Protego! Protego! Protego! Protego!”

The projectiles kept coming at a pace too fast for Harry to be able to deflect them all, he had to call upon all his training in duelling and as a Seeker to dart, dash and duck out of the way. Eventually, the monster halted for a second and Harry dug out one of the twins’ specially made gifts and tossed it at its feet.

The pellet exploded in large clouds of smoke, engulfing the beast in its hold and blocking it from
sight until the began to dissipate slightly, only it didn’t disappear. Instead, it settled on the creature’s body, weighing it down like freshly poured cement until the last molecule of the smog had finally lifted, leaving behind a freshly frozen monster.

“\textit{Reducto!}”

The curse held true and smashed into the immobile creature’s stomach, blasting its insides apart until they splattered across the floor, landing just shy of Harry’s quaking figure. A spot of blood landing on his shoe snapped him out of his shock and propelled him into a run. He ran until his legs gave out and his eyes began to tear, stopping only for a moment to cast the Point-Me spell once more and continue on his course—resolutely pushing the deadly encounter he’d just had to the back of his mind and only bothering with hastily conjured bandages to staunch the bleeding from a cut to his side that he hadn’t noticed before.

According to the watch around his wrist, it was twenty minutes later when he started to hear screaming from out in the distance—human, female screaming.

“Fleur!”

He followed her voice down turns and twists until she suddenly became silent and that’s when he pushed himself harder. Skidding around a turn, Harry became frozen on his feet when he saw none other than Krum leaning over Fleur’s falling figure, seeming to study her dispassionately before straightening out and shooting a red ball of light into the air.

“Krum! What are you doing?” asked Harry, having silently edged closer to the older boy. Krum’s blank eyes and slack face as he turned to Harry was not what the youngest champion had expected. “Krum, is that you?” he enquired once more, gripping his wand tightly.

“\textit{Expelliarmus!}” snarled Krum, but Harry had already conjured a shield and the spell bounced harmlessly off of it, followed by a flurry of other spells.

Krum was a machine, his spells never stopped coming, he just kept flinging them at Harry, forcing the other boy to go on the defensive with no time to even try returning fire. The same pattern continued until one of the enchantments ricocheted off Harry’s shield and headed straight for Krum’s face—the older boy ducked out of its path, but Harry now had an opening. He began to send the same debilitating—yet harmless—spells back at Krum, their positions in battle changing until Harry was the one driving back Krum.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you, Krum!” shouted Harry, shooting off another Body-Binding Curse. “What did you do to Fleur?”

The older champion’s lack of reaction, his continued blank expression, clued Harry in on what had happened to him more than anything else ever could—he remembered seeing that same combination of symptoms on countless of his friends during a particularly harrowing Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Realization dawning on him, Harry faltered in his spellwork and received a mouthful of earth as Krum aimed an explosion at his feet, calling up a cloud of dust that obscured him from view.

By the time Harry had stumbled away and his vision cleared, Krum was already and—he scanned the area further—so was Fleur.

“Fuck!” Harry gripped the sides of his hair and pulled. “\textit{Fuck!”}

He ran north, where his wand pointed to, trying to catch any glimpse of the imperiused Krum and failing miserably the longer he kept at it. He came across an Acromantula on his way to the cup
(never thinking he’d actually be grateful to Voldemort as he said, “Arania Exumai!”), a Sphinx guarding the only way forward that would lead him north and a Blast-Ended-Skrewt that was child’s play compared to everything else.

As he stepped into what could have been the makings of a small town square, a light blue blue quickly called his attention to a platform in the centre of the large opening in the maze. The Triwizard Cup rested on a small pedestal, about chest-height, chasing off the gathering darkness and mist, a siren singing of endless riches, fame and, most important of all—an end to the Tournament.

“Harry! Duck!”

A tree trunk mashed down in the exact same place where Harry had stood as a pink coloured spell whizzed past his head. Having ducked, rolled and sprinted away, Harry turned back once he was in relative safety and swallowed hard as memories of flying clubs, Hermione’s screams, broken porcelain and a wand stuck in a nose came flooding back. Turning to his side, he was greeted with the dirty and battered face of Cedric Diggory, right arm held gingerly against his side while the right one had his wand strained on the humongous troll.

“Thank you,” panted Harry, using his sleeve to wipe his brow.

“What kind of person would I be if I allowed my fellow Hogwarts champion be squashed flat by a troll?” Cedric grinned, eyes exhausted yet determined as he only snuck a glance at Harry before focusing his attention on the troll once more. “This tosser has been giving me a hard time for a while now—figured two heads think better than one, right?”

“Righ—"

He was cut off by an animalistic roar from the troll. It was scratching at his eyes with one hand as the other waved the club around nonsensically in the air.

“Conjunctivitis Curse,” explained Cedric, “I figured if it works on dragons, then it’s bound to do something to trolls, right?”

And he was right: the curse made him angry. The troll must have heard their raised voices over his own pained shouts for it abruptly let go of his eyes and turned the red-rimmed orbs to focus on them with a disturbing amount of clarity that Harry would not have expected from the beast. It grasped its club in both hands, widened its stance, and stomped its feet, making the ground vibrate with the strength of his movements. It skidded its feets against the dirt one at a time while the other one was braced slightly in front of him, its body bend forward almost like a runner’s, a bull preparing to charge.

“I have an idea,” said Harry. “Ever heard about the Orbis Jinx?”

Cedric’s face scrunched up, “The one where you bury someone alive?”

“Something like that, we can stop before we bury his head in the ground, but the spell needs two people to cast it.”

Cedric didn’t hesitate. “What do I need to do?”

“When he charges at us, wait until the right moment when he’s just about to get us and then levitate him,” Harry’s breathing became ragged, “then I’ll do the rest.”

“You sure this will work?”
“Better than nothing.”

The troll had had enough of their chit-chat and charged straight at them, its face twisted into a mindless, violent need that only crushing their skulls in with his weapon and spilling their blood could satisfy. Bracing themselves at the terrifying sight, Harry trusted in Cedric’s instincts as a Seeker to strike at just the right moment and was rewarded when a yelled, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" swept the beast off its feet and dangling mid-air.

“*Orbis!*”

The earth beneath the troll flashed green before a swirling vortex of rock, grass and dirt began to form, sucking in air from its space as it became bigger and bigger, large enough to swallow the beast whole—and that’s exactly what happened. With a shudder, the earth contracted once, twice, and began to pull in the troll. A hand on his arm urged Cedric to release his own spell on the creature, nearly collapsing from exhaustion and watching with muted shock as first its feet, the its legs, torso, and finally its shoulders were swallowed into the earth.

A sharp downward flick of his wrist and the jinx was forced to come to an end, the troll’s head left sitting on the ground like an overly realistic Halloween pumpkin decoration. The troll’s struggles to break free were shaking the ground at their feet and Harry, for one, did not want to stay behind to see if a spell he’d never used before would have any luck in containing a fully grown mountain troll.

“Come on.”

Struggling on what he was sure was a twisted ankle, Harry offered Cedric his support as he half-dragged the other boy to the foot of the pedestal where the cup stood, falling down next to him as they enjoyed the time to take a breather, the troll’s frustrated grunts, huffs and howls a harrowing harmony in the background.

“Don’t know what’s worse,” said Cedric, “taking on that troll alone or getting chased down like cattle by another champion.” He winced then, massaging his aching shoulder with a scowl on his face.

“Krum came after you too?”

“He practically hunted me down. I managed to stun him in the end though and then I ran away.”

“He wouldn’t have done that if he’d been in his right mind,” said Harry, “he was imperiused, I’m sure of it. He got to Fleur, too.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. I think he just stunned her and shot up the signal to get her out of the Tournament. I—I couldn’t see what happened to her and when I could, she was already gone.”

“Fuck,” gasped Cedric, tilting his head up to the sky and closing his eyes. “Now what?”

“The cup’s right there and I’m not gonna stop you,” Harry’s words had Cedric turn sharply towards him. “We both know you’re the real Hogwarts champion here, you made it this far and I shouldn’t have even been allowed to enter in the first place. Take it.”

Cedric bit his lip and confessed, “I wouldn’t have been able to come this far without you, you know. You helped me finish that troll and he was getting the best of me before you showed up. And don’t think I don’t know it was you that gave me the heads up about the dragons.”
Harry shrugged. “You would’ve figured something out.”

Struggling to his feet, Cedric held his hand out to Harry and pulled the other boy up, not letting go of his grip and, instead, clasping his hand in a handshake.

“Either way, Hogwarts wins this Tournament and I say that we both deserve to go back as real champions. We’ll go together. On three.” Cedric didn’t allow Harry any room to argue, letting go of his hand to leave it hovering over one of the cup’s handles.

Although Harry held no interest in becoming Hogwarts’ champion, he could tell from the stubborn set of Cedric’s jaw that he wouldn’t take no for an answer and would continue arguing with him until Harry gave in. The younger wizard sported a rueful smile as he nodded towards the other boy and mirrored his stance.

“One. Two. Three!”
Their landing was less graceful than Harry would’ve hoped. It was also quiet. Until that moment,Harry hadn’t realized that he’d already pictured their return home, the wailing crowds suddenly crescentdoing when they caught sight of their two champions, Bagman’s smug declaration lording over them all as friends and family rushed forward in a stampede of excitement and love… Maybe he’d watched one too many of Dudley’s movies to have his expectations set so high.

Instead, he and Cedric had arrived in a desolate, grey courtyard. Slabs of stone rose up sporadically from the ground and a statue of an angel with one of its hands held forward in supplication dominated their view. Grey-white mist hung, suspended in time just as Harry’s heart was lodged in his throat, pulse quickening as his senses picked up something he wasn’t ready to acknowledge.

“We’re in a cemetery,” he pointed out the obvious.

“You think this is another challenge we have to go through since there are two of us?”

“They couldn’t have known two people would touch the cup.”

“Maybe it’s faulty… I’ll take a look.”

As Cedric approached the fallen cup cautiously, like one might entice a frightened animal, Harry held out his wand in front of him and walked up to the angel’s statue. What had seemed from afar like a majestic piece of architecture was now less imposing, more worn down and feeble with green slabs of moss covering the angel in random patches and chips of marble having long fallen prey to the elements.

Harry bent down to brush a cautious hand across the dirt and grass covering the name of the deceased and froze in place.

Tom Riddle Senior.

“Cedric! Quick, we have to—” a shuffling, scraping noise had Harry cut off his warning mid-sentence. Simultaneously, both boys adopted defensive stances where they stood, each facing the eastern side of the cemetery as a hunched, limping figure draped in a dark cloak emerged out of the fog. Harry began to feel pressure against the back of his left eye, a pressure originating from his mind, he knew—someone was testing him, plucking at his defences with mild interest to see where he was weakest.

Harry made an effort to strengthen his walls, but he might as well have been using his hands to stop the rain from falling, each time he handled a breach, a new one popped up, then another, and another, and another until he couldn’t focus anymore and he was forced down to his knees as his brain tried valiantly to squeeze its way out of his skull. Distantly, he heard Cedric’s voice calling out—to him, or to the cloaked person coming ever closer, Harry didn’t know. His hand closed around his wand until he could feel the wood digging into his palm, his only tangible link to the physical world.

The ringing in his ears had reached new heights, but it still didn’t hinder him completely from hearing the cry, “Avada Kedavra!”, and neither did the black spots dancing in front of his eyes stop him from seeing the flash of bright green slamming into Cedric. It sliced through the boy’s hastily conjured shield and sank into his chest, seeping into skin through to the bone.

Cedric dropped and Harry screamed.
He must have, otherwise why would his throat feel like it was swallowing past glass? Why would his chest feel like it was minutes away from caving into his heart institute mess of coronary tissue and bone? Why would he feel like the cloying pain in his head was only second to the panic and horror shaking the very foundations of his soul?

He felt himself being lifted in the air, his back slammed onto rock and his wrists and ankles tied with rope. He was left, suspended against something as Cedric’s murderer removed his cloak, conjured a cauldron with boiling water and dropped something heavy into it. It was followed by the up and down cadence of an incantation that Harry couldn’t focus on for the life of him, the pain in his head had faded away to the dull ache of a past injury, but he continued to watch the proceedings from a blurred distance.

There was blood. First, the man’s as he cut off his hand, then Harry’s as the face of a traitor came forward and slashed at Harry’s arm, gathering his blood in a vial to join the flesh and bone already simmering in the water.

The incantation came to an end. Pettigrew was left bleeding out on the ground whilst the cauldron bubbled, flashed a sickly yellow and overflowed. As the wizard of Harry’s nightmares rose out of the cauldron, Harry wished that Wormtail would bleed out, that he die right there, licking the dirty floor at his precious master’s feet while the latter watched him impassively.

“Harry Potter,” said Voldemort, the name rolled around his tongue as though he were trying it on for size—curious and expectant at the same time. “I see you’ve made it to my awakening. So glad you could join us.”

Voldemort bent down over Pettigrew’s sobbing frame, hands deftly removing his wand from the other wizard’s rags and holding it up in front of him.

“Hmmm,” he hummed. Wordlessly, he pointed the wand at Pettigrew and the man dissolved into screams, body curved inward and cradling something to his chest as Voldemort passively watched the display. His wand lifted and the screaming ceased, Pettigrew stopped shaking long enough to stagger to his feet, right arm cradling the left where a hand with a metallic sheen had replaced the one he’d cut off.

“Th—thank you, m—my master. It is b—beautiful. Thank you, my Lord, thank you!”

Voldemort wasn’t listening. He was staring at Harry.

Harry felt a touch against his mind, almost like a caress. He felt bile gathering behind his tongue. Voldemort’s lips twitched, as though attempting a smile.

“I ask you, Harry Potter, what’s a party without guests?” his arm snaked back to grasp at Pettigrew and push up his sleeve, thumb pressing down on his Dark Mark.

They began to arrive. There were two, then eight, then twelve, nineteen, thirty-seven—Harry counted fifty-six witches and wizards dressed in long, black cloaks and wearing the same masks as the group that had attacked the Quidditch World Cup all those months ago. They’d formed a circle around their master and Harry, standing eerily still and silent as they regarded their leader with equal amounts of veneration and fear.

“My children,” Voldemort began, “my Death Eaters, how long has it been since we last saw each other? How long since we conquered the world and laid to waste the fools of the Ministry and the vermin Muggles? How long?” he let his question hang in the air like the blade of a guillotine. “I’m sure if you ask our guest of honour, he can tell you exactly how long it’s been.”
“My Lord, we never—”

“Silence!” Voldemort shut down the voice of a woman. “Most of my followers abandoned their master—those who were loyal to me are imprisoned in Azkaban for their dedication, their servitude! I am left with the pitiful dregs that would rather hide their faces behind masks and simper at the Ministry’s feet rather than face their righteous punishment!”

One by one, the Death Eaters were subjected to the Cruciatus Curse under the gleeful, red eyes of Voldemort. With each new torture, each new set of screams, Harry struggled harder against the ropes holding him to the angel until he could wiggle his hands free, but by then it was too late. Voldemort had grown bored of torturing his followers and, instead, had his eyes strained on Harry.

“Crucio.”

Harry would later realize that he had never really known pain until that very moment. He had never known the crushing agony the likes of which could force his body to undulate and twist into inconceivable positions, how his back could arch into a perfectly formed **u** with only his head, hands and feet gracing the marble stone. He would’ve thought that at one point, when the pain became too much, when it hit that point where your nerves couldn’t possibly send more hurt for your brain to process, that your senses would cease to function and you’d remain in a state of jelly-like limbo where you would, in theory, still feel the pain, but you couldn’t really feel it anymore.

He was wrong.

The curse finally lifted and Harry took in his first breath of. His stuttered out pants echoed in his ears and nearly drowned out the jeering and laughter of the Death Eaters who took pleasure in taunting him.

“Let us see,” said Voldemort softly, “how the great Harry Potter fares against the full might of Lord Voldemort.”

The ties on his ankles and wrists loosened and Harry didn’t have the strength to brace himself as his body swayed forward and crash-landed on the ground, one of the crystals in his glasses shattering upon impact.

The laughter continued.

Something hit him lightly on the back of the head, bouncing off and landing within eyesight—his wand. Harry fought his quivering muscles and rose to his feet, teetered on the verge of falling—to everyone else’s amusement—and crouched down to pick up his wand.

“I’m sure by now you know the rules of duelling, Harry. First, the opponents face each other,” — Voldemort locked eyes with him— “then, they bow—”

“I’ll die before I bow down to you,” Harry pushed out through trembling lips and a heavy tongue. It gave Voldemort pause.

“That just won’t do. **Imperio!**”

Harry braced himself for the cloud of euphoria that would drown his senses and brushed off Voldemort’s voice when it began to whisper sweet, tempting suggestions in his mind. The whispers got louder and more insistent the longer Harry resisted, but he persevered and pushed off the attack entirely, a hint of a smile playing across his chapped lips when Voldemort stumbled back a step.

The Death Eaters began to look uneasy.
“Enough,” said Voldemort. “We duel.”

That was all the warning Harry got before a battalion of spells rained down on him like vicious daggers. Sweet adrenaline now coursing through his veins and he flipped into action, rolling, ducking and hiding behind headstones to avoid being hit by Voldemort’s attacks. It was unlike any other duel Harry had been in; he couldn’t get a spell in edgewise and had to make do with shoddy shields and his naturally fast reflexes to avoid curses of which he didn’t even know the names.

His last refuge now rubble in the dirt, Harry dashed behind the statue holding Tom Riddle Senior’s remains, but he wasn’t fast enough. A cutting curse sliced hotly across his shin and had him screaming out in pain, falling hands first behind a dead woman’s tombstone. Blood was rushing down his pant leg, to the tip of his sock and into his shoe, it made his clothes stick to his skin and look like black tar. Dirt caked his hands and nails as he dragged himself across the ground so his body would be covered by the headstone and the resulting rattle from his pockets sparked a desperate idea.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” crooned Voldemort. “Come out and play…”

Shaking, Harry tore a strip of fabric from the cut on his pants and tied it around his thigh to staunch the flow of blood. He hissed through clenched teeth as he moved to a crouch and took his weapons in hand, his wand was tapped against each and every one before he threw the twin’s gifts over his head.

An explosion rocked the earth on its axis. Death Eaters screamed questions at each other, firing off spells every which way in the hopes of landing a lucky hit on Harry and more often than not incapacitating one of their own.

Harry’s breath rattled in his chest as he sprinted towards his one hope at salvation: the cup. He didn’t think about what he would find if he got there, didn’t waste a second’s worry picturing Cedric’s still corpse guarding the trophy, once bright brown eyes now dimmed with a film of death and impending decay as his body was left staring up at the heavens for help.

“I got’im!”

Harry felt pressure on his left shoulder and next thing he knew, he was falling to the ground, legs locked tightly together. The blood pooling in his mouth from a bitten lip muffled his shouts as his wound gathered rocks, dirt and clumps of grass from the ground. He fumbled to point his wand at himself, the counter-spell teetering on the tip of his broken lip, but more Death Eaters must have caught up to him for they began firing blindly in his direction. He kept low to the ground and swallowed a mouthful of blood against the electric shocks of pain shooting up his leg.

A sound like thunder shot into the air to bounce to the edges of the cemetery, only to be reflected back to ten times its power. Harry clapped his hands over his ears and closed his eyes to slits as a vicious wind swept up the dirt, the smog, the last of the Weasleys’ magic, into a tornado of sound and light. As sudden as it had appeared, the tornado shrank to the size of a doorknob, twirling on the ground like an oversized spinning top, and got smaller and smaller until it blinked out of existence, leaving Voldemort standing exactly where he had been when Harry had thrown his last attack.

“It’s time we end this game once and for all, Harry,” he murmured softly. “Twice now, you’ve escaped my grasp—there will not be a third time.”

Harry surged to his feet.

“Avada Kedavra!”
“Expelliarmus!”

The two spells crashed into each other and held taut, a battle for power that neither wizard was willing to lose. Harry couldn’t help his utter fixation on the sight before him, his and Voldemort’s magic visibly fighting for dominance before his very eyes in thick strands of red and green lightning pushing and pulling at each other as two stubborn children would tumble on the playground—and Voldemort was winning.

Like a game of tug-of-war, the knot of magic where the two spells met was steadily inching its way closer and closer to Harry’s end, and from the look of abstract glee on Voldemort’s face, he didn’t think that was a good thing. He concentrated all his power, every drop of magic he could feel bubbling in his veins, on pushing the knot closer to Voldemort’s wand. He felt a shift in himself, in the resistance given by his wand and magic, and the knot came to a stop for a millisecond’s time, pulsing with uncertainty as it decided which way to go, before slowly drifting towards Voldemort.

Voldemort’s top lip curled up in fury and he brought up both hands to hold his wand, visibly straining against the force of their connection, but it was too late. The knot reached the tip of Voldemort’s wand to sink into the wood and then explode into thousand jets of silver electricity. The wand at Harry’s fingertips began to heat up, it vibrated in his hands, sent an electrifying buzz up his arms, through his body and to the ground until Harry thought that this is what it must be like to be a conduit between two live wires.

A silhouette of something was emerging from Voldemort’s wand—a ghost—first the head, the shoulders, a worn, corduroy jacket and then a late middle-aged man was hovering by the dark wizard’s shoulder.

“Would you look at that,” he seemed bemused, of all things. “I’ll be damned. You’re doin’ good, kid. Just keep it up for a bit longer, the others are coming.”

Harry wasn’t given time to wonder at the dead man’s words before another spirit sprang out of Voldemort’s wand and all the oxygen in the world might have been sucked away into the universe for all the good it did him.

“He’s right, you’re doing great, Harry.” Cedric. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of this one and you can head home, maybe… take my body to my dad, okay? If you can. Tonight’s not your night to say goodbye, but it was mine and you let him know I’m okay now.”

Harry’s throat clogged up with tears. He wanted to crawl over to Cedric—the real one or the one talking to him right now, it didn’t matter—and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to change places with the kind, older boy that had let him share in his moment of victory when it should have been his alone to bask in. He wanted him to be alive, to be back home with his father and his girlfriend and his friends and receive the bloody cup that had caused all this mess like the champion he was.

He wanted to trade places with Cedric, because the boy didn’t deserve to die.

“Cedric,” Harry choked out, “I’m so sorry, please, I’m—”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Cedric smiled, “this isn’t your fault. It was never your fault.”

There was so much more left to say, but Harry could feel the magic shifting in the air, could see the tendrils surrounding Voldemort turn weak and frail. He concentrated harder and two more figures appeared.

“My sweet boy,” cooed a woman with his same eyes, “you’ve grown into such a brave young man.
We always knew you would, sweetheart.”

“We’re so proud of you, love,” his father had his same unruly hair and the dimple on his right cheek when he smiled that Harry had despised as a younger boy. “Just a couple seconds more and we’ll help you get out of here.”

“Don’t worry sweetheart, it’ll be okay.”

“Stay brave, son, alright? You’ve gotten this far and you’ll go so much further.”

“This isn’t the end, Harry, not by a long shot.”

“We love you.”

Harry lost his fight with his tears and they cascaded down his cheeks in waterfalls of salt and heartbreak.

“Mum,” he whispered. “Dad.”

His dead parents beamed.

“When we tell you to, let go of the connection with Voldemort and run,” his father told him. “We can only hold him off for so long, so make it count.”

“Now, Harry!”

He jerked his wand to the side at his mother’s shout, connection broken, and began to run. His last image of his parents was of them converging on Voldemort like vengeful angels with the strange man and Cedric by their side.

He spotted the glowing cup before he registered Cedric’s body lying next to it. A howl of rage from behind spurred him those last few metres, but someone sprung in his way before he could make it to the cup. Pettigrew.

The sight of the man did something to Harry, called upon a long buried animalistic rage that he didn’t even feel towards Voldemort himself, and he stunned him before the rat even had a chance to raise his wand.

Pettigrew crumbled to the ground just as Harry skidded to his side. He threw himself over his and Cedric’s bodies and closed his hand around the cup.

He barely registered the tug on his navel before he was greeted by sharp sounds and bright colours. Harry twisted to his side and fell on his back next to Cedric. He stared up at the moon, chest barely moving as he heaved in minimal bursts of air and let his ears register the change as cheers turned to screams turned to cries turned to terrifying sobs. His left arm graced Cedric’s own arm and he was still warm, just like Harry.

He closed his eyes for a second, let the screams get drowned out by the ringing in his head and pretended they were both dead.

A group of people rounded on the three wizards, one dead, one wishing he were and one unconscious. Although he couldn’t focus on their words, he recognized the moment they realized Cedric wasn’t alive because he began to hear louder cries, and the moment Pettigrew was discovered because all the noise cut off to stunned silence and then to muttered disbelief.
Professor Dumbledore’s face appeared in Harry’s vision. The man peered into Harry’s eyes with a sadness and pity that the young boy would’ve felt as his own if he wasn’t a thousand stars away from planet earth. He didn’t attempt to talk to Harry like others were trying to do, he just shared in his sorrow for a moment, allowed the young wizard to see that he was not alone, before retreating from his line of sight. Thick, strong arms wrapped around Harry’s back and legs, cradling him in an embrace of fur, shaggy black hair and the smell of firewood.

Oddly, it reminded him of home.

The back and forth swaying as Harry was carried elsewhere lulled him further into the comfort of his own mind. He felt it as he was deposited somewhere, the back of his legs landed on something plush and warm—an armchair, perhaps. A saucepan of a hand brushed his hair back, lingering on his scar, and then Harry was cocooned in a blanket. Retreating footsteps. A door opens and shuts, opens and shuts, then something hot and minty is being forced down his throat. It scalds his throat on its way down, but it also wakes up whatever had been lying dormant in Harry since he arrived back.

“With us now, Potter?”

Professor Moody sat across from him, both eyes fixed on the young wizard with an intensity that soon became uncomfortable. The man’s gruff growl succeeded in breaking the last of Harry’s stupor and he became alert.


“They’re all taking care of business outside. These are my quarters, you’ll be safe here until we can get all this mess sorted out,” said Moody, “and to do that, I’m gonna need you to tell me what happened.”

Haltingly, Harry recalled everything that had occurred from the moment Krum attacked Fleur to touching the cup with Cedric to arriving at the cemetery where Voldemort was reborn and his traitor servant murdered Harry’s friend.

“So, you’re saying the Dark Lord has come back to full power…” mused Moody.

“You don’t believe me now, but—”

“Oh, I believe you. Tell me again, Potter, how many Death Eaters showed up?”

“I counted fifty-six.”

Moody let out a derisive scoff. “And what did the Dark Lord do to the few deserters who managed to scrounge up enough balls to show their faces? Was he harsh? Did he punish them for their incompetence? Did he greet them with open arms?”

A shiver curved up Harry’s spine and settled uncomfortably on the back of his neck.

“I—he wasn't happy with any of them, I guess, if the tortures were anything to go by.”

“Good good,” muttered Moody. “The Dark Lord, what was he like? He's always been a…” Moody's tongue snaked across his lip, “powerful presence, and I imagine with his father's essence and your blood, he'll be unstoppable now. He'll be invincible.”

Alarm bells surged to power in Harry's mind, flashing luminescent red and blaring fohorns as the professor's words registered. Underneath the mountain of blankets he'd been ensconced in, he reached into his pocket where he could feel his wand digging painfully into his injured leg.
“I never mentioned what Pettigrew did for the ritual,” he said softly.

Moody’s head immediately snapped in his direction, a manic grin in place like none that Harry had seen on the man before. The frayed edges around his face became even more blurred to the him, almost taunting him as they shifted and distorted the man’s appearance to the point where the front of his head wasn’t recognizable as a face anymore.

“Potter, Potter, a bit slow on the take there, but no worries, you won’t be needing your pretty little head much longer once my master takes care of you. Incar—”

"Petrificus Totalus!" 

The impostor disguising himself as Moody—Harry was now certain that this man was not the revered Auror—dove out of the way of the oncoming spell and took cover behind a desk chair. Harry clambered out of his own chair, throwing the blanket up into the air to work as a distraction as he searched for cover. Crouching behind a desk as best he could with his leg, Harry began firing off spells at Not Moody, but when none of them even came close to hitting its mark, he re-evaluated and settled for destroying anything and everything in the wizard’s vicinity.

But the man was good. His skills in combat and duelling were clearly better than Harry’s, he was able to shield himself from the exploding wreckage and still be able to shoot offensive spells back at Harry in the interim. It wasn’t long before he gained the upper hand and, with nothing left for Harry to destroy, rose to his feet and advanced on him.

Harry cursed in his head, still parrying magic against magic, but growing steadily more desperate as the Not Moody came closer and closer.

Surely someone must have heard the explosions and were now on their way, Harry thought. And even if they weren’t close enough to hear the chaos, the telling lights of rapid spellwork could be seen from outside through any window into the room.

But so far, no one had come and Harry wasn’t wasting any time hoping they would. He steeled himself, conjured a shield and limped to the corner of the room where he could see a blackboard having been tossed on its side during the fight. He could feel the pit-pit-pat of spells and curses colliding with his own defences before he dropped behind the blackboard and the spells were suddenly flying over his head and battering the wood at his back.

His change of landscape hadn’t been for nothing, he’d gotten a somewhat clearer view of the room at hand and now knew that if he just waited long enough for Not Moody to get in place, then he’d have a shot at stopping him.

Not Moody took one step forward, two, four, and he was right in place. Throwing all caution to the wind, Harry cancelled his shield spell and swivelled in place, putting him face to face with the other wizard.

“What do you have for me now, boy? Ready to give up already?” Not Moody sneered.

Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t Harry aiming for the ceiling right above his head. Sparks flew as the spell hit its target, raining down on the other wizard’s head before a light fixture followed in its place. Not Moody was knocked over the head by a lamp and his legs surrendered under the structure’s weight as it fell on top of him.

His breathing was harsh in the newfound silence in the room. Harry was staring at the pool of blood gathering underneath Not Moody’s head when the door to the office rattled against its hinges, as
though someone were pushing their weight against it, then was blasted open. Shards of wood and pieces of metal flew into the room, clearing a path of destruction for professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, Minister Fudge and a group of Aurors. They took in the sight before them with cautious looks.

“You're late,” intoned Harry, voice as harsh and brittle as pine needles under frost. His own legs gave out under him and he fell to the dirty floor. Professor McGonagall descended upon him before he was properly splayed on the ground. She shook out her cloak and draped it over his shoulders with a tenderness she took pains not to make known.

The Aurors had separated into two groups, one group was checking on the pinned wizard in the middle of the room while the other had their wands trained on Harry. Dumbledore strode past them to kneel before the boy.

“I'd like you to tell me what happened here, Harry,” he said gently, yet with a hint of unquestionable authority that told the young wizard he didn't have to worry about a thing anymore. It was okay.

“Professor Moody,” —Harry licked his lips— “or whoever he is… he was always blurry to me, makes sense now… he started to ask questions about what happened when—when Cedric died and Voldemort came back. But his questions were off, he slipped a bit and then attacked. We fought,” then Harry added, almost as an afterthought, “he's a good fighter. I shot down the light and it fell on him and he was knocked out… He's knocked out, right? He's not—he can't be—I mean, he's just—I'm not, I've never—”

He couldn't breathe. His chest was expanding, in and out, in an out, but nothing was coming in, his lungs weren't getting any air. He could taste his beating pulse in the back of his throat, every undulation brought with it a tighter grip around his airway until he could no longer pull in any oxygen and his vision was clouding over, black spots danced in the back of his eyes and he cried out because he couldn't think he couldn’t breathe couldn’t…

Something warm spread through his body, from his head down to his toes. It was a comforting warmth, like the first sip of hot butterbeer after a long day out in the cold. The vice around his throat came loose and he could breathe again (inhale, three counts, exhale), he sucked in lungfuls of air desperately.

“There you go. Nice and easy.”

Madame Pomfrey kneeled before him, uncaring of the shards of glass digging into her knees as she peered intently into his eyes and kept a hand on the back of his head, fingers pressing against his scalp. Although he could breathe again, great and big lungfuls of air, his hands couldn't stop shaking and he could feel the panic rising up again and threatening to swallow him whole this time.

“—not responding how I'd hoped… should be better by now. I apologize for this, Mr Potter,” murmured Madame Pomfrey.

He didn’t know anything else after that.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-
“These games were supposed to be safe, Albus,” she rumbled. “You promised me when we first spoke of the Tournament that our children would come to no harm. Then Mr Potter's name came out of the Goblet and you said we'd look after him, but now Mr Digg—” she bit back a distressed cry, “Mr Diggory is dead and H—Harry… we had to sedate him, Albus! You saw what this was doing to him! He's just a child, for Merlin's sake!”

“And yet, we both know he isn't just any normal child,” said Dumbledore. “Not even fifteen years old and he's already faced Voldemort more times than almost any other witch or wizard I know. That does not excuse what happened here,” he hastened to add, “but it's time we face the fact that Harry Potter is no longer an ordinary student, and hasn't been for quite some time.

“Voldemort has finally returned—Harry may not have been able to say as much, given the circumstances, but I see no other explanation for Mr Diggory’s death, Harry’s entrance in the Tournament, Pettigrew’s reappearance and, perhaps most incriminating: Severus’ mark has returned.”

Neither Professor McGonagall nor Madame Pomfrey made their reactions to this news overtly known other than through the minute pursing of one’s lips and a shaky inhaled breath which was drowned out in the noise of the room.

“You failed to mention that in any of our latest meetings, Albus,” McGonagall’s tone could freeze the hottest of deserts. “How long have you known of Professor Snape’s mark? Were you ever planning on sharing your suspicions with the rest of us? Of would you have waited, even after the Tournament had finished, if Mr Diggory hadn’t shown up murdered.”

“Minerva, you must understand—”

“I must do no such thing, Headmaster Dumbledore,” she rebutted. “Do not tell me to listen to your poor excuses when there is a boy lying dead at our feet and another one who would’ve gotten there himself if it weren’t for some quick thinking and dumb luck!”

“This boy has been to my infirmary a minimum of twice a year for four years,” said Madame Pomfrey, levitating Harry to manifest a stretcher underneath him. “I've mended broken bones, muscle strains, cured exhaustion, replenished his blood, and I also noted past scars, badly mended bones and trauma which speak of injuries that I've seen all too much of in children of abuse. It is clear that Mr Potter is not safe at home and yet, he is not safe here, either. If we can’t say that he is better off here, with us, than he is in a home where he is violently mistreated, then how can you say we must understand when you dole out excuses for what has happened today.”

Professor McGonagall was brimming with something unspoken as she listened to Madame Pomfrey’s impassioned statement and she took her gaze away only to pin unforgivingly on the Hogwarts headmaster who had never looked more his age.

“I…” Dumbledore swallowed harshly and closed his eyes, “I am ashamed to admit that, in spite of everything I did know, what little I could decipher, it was never enough, I could never put it to use, I merely… Every year since Harry has joined us, I’ve strengthened the wards around the school to the best of my ability and yet, Voldemort keeps finding new ways to rush past me to gain access to him, to Harry,” Dumbledore admitted.

“Perhaps if you had clued us in on what you were doing then we each could have lent our skills and expertise on the matter,” McGonagall was unforgiving in her reprimand of the older wizard. Dumbledore took the words as a physical blow and visibly shrunk in on himself. “This school and the children housed inside of it are as much our responsibility as they are yours. For Merlin’s sake, Albus! We had a basilisk living underneath the girl’s bathroom and no one had a clue. It took the
combined brain power of three twelve year olds to figure out a decades’ old mystery that we couldn’t be bothered to solve until it was almost too late.

“And now,” she said, “we have a murdered sixth year student who could’ve used our help, our protection, and a traumatised fourth year student whom we’ve continuously failed to protect lying at our feet, unconscious. What will it be next? Who will have to be next before you get it through your head that all these secrets have finally come back to haunt you and they are taking lives.”

All three adults fell silent. The Aurors in the background had already cuffed the Moody impersonator and were in the process of searching the room for any hidden objects, traps or escape routes that the wizard may have installed in his time as professor.

“I must admit, there came a time when, after years—decades—of everyone telling you how great and infallible you are, you start to believe it. That is my mistake,” Dumbledore admitted, his gaze unseeing as he twirled his wand between his two index fingers.

“It is,” stressed McGonagall.

“The past cannot be changed, not even I have that power,” Dumbledore smiled with only his mouth.

“I am not asking you to change the past. Right now, out there, there are children—scared and terrified children—who need us more than ever before. Your mistakes and secrets end here. Today.”

McGonagall swept back her cloak with a twist of a shoulder and advanced on Dumbledore with her head held high. “I am the Deputy Headmistress of this school and I vowed to go above and beyond my capabilities to protect and instruct every student who walked through our doors. These past four years have threatened that vow with every cryptic answer you dealt onto us, every dug up secret to surface for air and every piece of information you kept to yourself for reasons I do not want to hear.

“It is far too late to change what has already happened, but that does not mean we cannot change how we handle these situations from here on out. We have hundreds of people depending on all of us, Albus, not just you.”

“I apologize, Minerva,” whispered Dumbledore, finding it difficult to look his deputy in the eye. “You are right, of course. If my silence on certain matters was ever to anyone’s advantage, that is the case no longer. You are not the only person I owe an apology to.”

McGonagall’s shoulders dropped a millimetre and her grip on her wand loosened. “I do not need your words telling me you’re sorry, Albus. I need you to let your actions speak for themselves, prove to me that you can change for the better and do it soon.”

A crash from another side of the room startled them both and cut the tension their discussion had wrought. McGonagall carefully stepped away from Dumbledore and watched as the man methodically ran a finger along his beard and squinted his eyes at nothing in particular.

“The Tournament was a failure,” he began. “No doubt the press is already swarming the stands and descending upon the scene of the crime as we speak, but we shall let the Ministry deal with that themselves. In the meantime, we have two distraught parents to take care of, a school of students to reassure and a castle to secure. Madame Pomfrey, please take Harry to the infirmary and do not allow anyone in to see him unless they have been first checked by either myself or any senior member of staff.”

Madame Pomfrey nodded to the headmaster and levitated the stretcher in front of her as she prepared to walk out of the room. On her way to the door, her eyes met with McGonagall’s and their gazes held fast to one another’s for an indescribable moment. Neither of them said anything as Madame
Pomfrey walked out the room, leaving the two professors and the group of Aurors behind.

“There is not enough time to ward the school properly unless we plan on implementing extreme safety measures which would shut down any and all contact with the outside world,” said McGonagall.

“You are right, of course,” Dumbledore replied. “The castle’s warding stone is ancient and powerful, but it would require more time than we have available to set it up in the manner we need to. We will have to take temporary measures to ensure everyone’s safety.”

“Surely you don’t think the school is under threat of attack so soon?” asked McGonagall, looking positively sick to her stomach.

“I wish to say with certainty that no, Voldemort would not risk showing his hand so soon after his resurrection, but I’ve underestimated him before and others have clearly paid the price—we are not taking any chances this time.”

Professor McGonagall shook her head in agreement.

“Headmaster! Headmaster Dumbledore!” called one of the Aurors. “We’ve found something, sir.”

Dumbledore and McGonagall strode over to where three Aurors stood around a black, wooden chest.

“This chest has a very strong magical signature. We think that there is something in here that the attacker didn’t want anyone to find,” said a young woman.

Both McGonagall and Dumbledore made some complicated gestures with their wands, nodding and tutting at whatever it was that their tests showed.

“There is definitely something in there...a life-form of some kind, perhaps human,” stated McGonagall.

“I concur. Professor McGonagall, if you would do us the honour of prying this chest open, myself and these fine Aurors will stand at the ready in case anything with less than friendly intentions should pop out,” said Dumbledore.

No more discussion was to be had, the three Aurors defected to the headmaster’s wisdom and took up their positions around the chest while Professor McGonagall muttered a mix of spells under her breath, wand pointed at the brass lock securing the trunk. The lid swung open with a hiss and a spark of blue. Professor McGonagall adopted a defensive stance and fearlessly stepped up to peer into the mouth of the trunk.

“Alastor!” she cried. “My word! Albus, quick, get someone down here right now!”

One of the Aurors was quick to volunteer, heaving himself inside the chest with his front turned towards them, only to disappear entirely as he descended into the depths of the magical trunk. Moments later, the body of an unconscious, dirty and malnourished Alastor Moody drifted out and was efficiently secured to a stretcher by the two remaining Aurors as they waited for their colleague to step out of the trunk before carting their patient off to the infirmary. The fourth Auror followed behind them, the face of a cuffed and unpolyjuiced Barty Crouch Junior on the body of the man that had single-handedly wrought chaos and destruction upon the world mere minutes ago.

Dumbledore watched the procession disappear around the corner with the broken body of one of his most trusted and oldest friends. He pushed back the other memories it brought about, of wizards and
witches in different uniforms carting off innocent victims to a war that he had at first encouraged, and then officials of similar garb trudging off with the bodies of more innocent victims to a second war, which he failed to stop.

“He will pull through this, Albus,” said Professor McGonagall. “He is too stubborn not to.”

“I have all the faith in the world that Alastor will make it through this, if only to have the chance to hunt down the man that did this to him in the first place. A man thought long to be dead.”

Professor McGonagall’s face contorted into an unreadable expression. “I was hoping it to be a trick of the light, surely some of my faculties were finally starting to recede with age,” she said.

Dumbledore chuckled mirthlessly. “The day you cease to be anything less than who you are right now, the world will know it’s the exact moment to lose all hope.”

“This is the start of a second war, Albus.”

“My dear Minerva, I’m not entirely sure the first war ever ended, we just let ourselves be fooled to believe it had… In any case, the school—our students—come first. Call every other professor in the castle, the students are to be led to their common rooms, prefects will perform the duties they were entrusted with and keep them calm whilst we secure the school.” McGonagall looked like she was about to question how, exactly, they would do that when they couldn’t alter the spells on the ward stone just yet, when Dumbledore spoke again, “We may not be able to draw upon the ancient magic in this castle and that is alright for now, but our bodies contain plenty of magic themselves, do they not?”

“You want us to become the anchors,” Professor McGonagall realized, “with no ward stone to tether our magic to the castle, you want us to act as conduits, the wards will reflect off each one of us and protect the school so long as we are inside of it.”

“Similar to a Secret Keeper, yes, although vastly different in other ways,” said Dumbledore. “We will not be able to keep the magic going for very long before we become exhausted ourselves, but it should last long enough for the school year to come to a close, and then we can begin to work on the ward stone.”

“I’ll alert the staff immediately,” Professor McGonagall left without a single word goodbye, excited by the prospect of doing something to ward off the storm that was surely headed their way.

At her departure, Dumbledore let the thread that had been holding him together unwind and drift to his feet. He no longer looked like Albus Dumbledore, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Headmaster of Hogwarts—he was just Albus Dumbledore, one hundred and thirteen year old wizard.

He looked around at the mess that spoke of a battle well-fought and wanted nothing more than to clean it all up, wipe away any and all evidence of what could have happened had a certain fourteen-year-old wizard not been as resourceful as he was. He feared he’d be cleaning something else entirely if that had been the case and then didn’t let himself linger on that thought that any further, he needed to save his strength to fortify the castle.

A ball of fire erupted over his head, dousing his beard in sparks which he was quick to put out. Fawkes’ phoenix song washed over Dumbledore, it surrounded him in its wonderful melody.

“You’re right. Time to get to work, old friend.”
Had he been in a muggle hospital, it would have been the beeping of the heartbeat monitor that woke him up, or the old television mounted on the wall which always showed the same cowboy movie, or perhaps the murmur of nurses and the echoing announcements from the main desk as life in the hospital continued to go on without him.

Since he wasn't in a muggle hospital, what woke him up was something wet, slimy and warm moving across his hand. Still in a dreamscape, he'd tried to move his hand away, had succeeded, but the feeling had followed him there, had seemed to get more insistent and enthusiastic the more he twitched away from the bothersome sensation. Whining followed his last attempts to escape and Harry finally opened his eyes to the face of a familiar black dog standing next to his bed, front paws poised on the mattress while he stared intently at Harry.

"Ms Pomfrey doesn’t allow pets in the infirmary,” is the first thing Harry managed to croak out, prompting Padfoot to begin licking at his hand in earnest amidst jubilant barks and tail wagging.

"Padfoot!” hissed a voice. "What’s all this racket? Do you want Poppy to kick you out again? Because she will…” Remus’ threat trailed off when he caught sight of glassy, green eyes staring back at him from the bed. “Cub, you’re awake! How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Just tell me what you need and I’ll go find Madame Pomfrey right now.”

“I… Moony, I…” Tears came out in place of words he couldn’t even find.

“Hey, hey, hey, no, it’s alright.”

In between Padfoot’s whines, Remus approached Harry’s bed and stood by his head, reaching out a hesitant hand to his hair and pulling his head close to his chest in an attempt at a hug. Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He felt a warm weight on his hand and peeked down to see his godfather watching him with bright eyes and downturned ears, a portrait of sadness.

“How long?” asked Harry.

“Fifteen hours. Poppy—Madame Pomfrey—said you needed the rest after…”

Harry felt his head shake into a nod. He disentangled himself from Remus.

“For obvious reasons, the end of the Tournament was cut short,” continued Remus. “Dumbledore sent everyone away who wasn’t a student—except us two—and no one has been allowed in or out of the castle ever since. News has spread fast around Britain and I think Dumbledore has received more than twenty dozen Howlers from worried parents, but they seem to be mollified once he tells them about the new measures that are being implemented in the castle.”

“If everyone’s here, why aren’t they…?”

“Here here? Poppy kicked them out a couple of hours ago and told them not to come back until they’d slept a full eight hours,” Remus smiled comfortingly. “They were worried about you, we all were.”

Padfoot barked once, softly, to show his agreement.

“Wh—what happened after I came back with…with Cedric and Pettigrew? What’s going to happen to—to them?” he couldn’t bring himself to refer to Cedric as anything else other than a person. Calling him a body seemed wrong, disrespectful almost, given everything that the other boy had done for him, even in death.

“Perhaps we should call Poppy and have her take a look at you first,” Remus appeared ready to bolt
“Tell me, Moony. Please.”

Remus sighed.

With a hand busy absently scratching Padfoot’s head, Harry listened as Remus told him about the Aurors that had been immediately called upon the scene of Harry’s arrival and declared Cedric’s death. The officials had carted off Pettigrew to the Ministry with promises of a thorough interrogation and had left behind a bumbling, sputtering Minister Fudge to deal with the flock of reporters demanding answers. His predicament wasn’t made any better when another group of Aurors was witnessed escorting an unconscious Alastor Moody and a previously thought to be deceased Barty Crouch Junior. Not even the minister’s personal bodyguards could’ve helped him evade the onslaught of reporters.

“...Dumbledore came to get us, told us what happened with you and Crouch, and we came to meet you here at the infirmary. Moody is here as well,” Remus gestured somewhere beyond the curtain enclosing Harry’s bed. “Other than the two of us, Mr and Mrs Diggory are also somewhere in the castle. They came to visit you once and...”

Harry stopped listening after that and turned his face away to look out the window where a storm was gathering in the distance, black clouds approaching in swarms as the wind howled and pushed them forward.

Padfoot and Remus’ vigil by his bedside became a silent one. Madame Pomfrey came by once to check over his progress and feed him some potions to speed his recovery, but she left once he made no effort to engage her back in any kind of conversation. He must have fallen asleep after that because when he opened his eyes again it was to see Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville huddled together at the bottom of his bed, building a house out of cards on a small round table.

He didn’t want to disturb them, but a movement from his leg had Ron glancing in his direction reflexively and double back with a happy, “Harry! About time, mate!”

The house of cards fell to pieces as his friends rushed to his side. They didn’t seem to know what to do with themselves once they were close though, their lips twitched with suppressed with worried smiles and shook with the effort of keeping their questions at bay.

Ginny pushed Ron from Harry’s side to make room for herself and barely hesitated in bending down and planting a warm kiss on his lips. He kissed her back and felt it as her lips moved to his forehead, right atop his scar, to deliver one final press.

“Harry.”

“Gin,” he said, just for her. “Hey guys.”

Hermione, Neville, Ron and Luna relaxed.

“Hey Harry, how are you feeling?” asked Hermione.

“Tired,” he said, “and like I fell a thousand feet from my broom. Also, thirsty and a bit hungry.”

“Lunch will be served soon,” said Neville helpfully. “We were going to head to the great hall in fifteen minutes or so if you didn’t wake up.”

“You could’ve just gone anyway, I would’ve been here when you came back.”
“We’ve been waiting two days for you to wake up, Harry,” said Ron, “lunch could wait a few more minutes.”

Harry thought that was the most thoughtfully Ron thing that he had ever said.

“Plus, it wasn’t fair that Remus and Padfoot got to talk to you and we didn’t,” added Ginny.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting then,” Harry felt his first smile in days threatening to make an appearance.

“I survived, but you’ll have to make it up to me sometime.”

“This is how it works then? I’m the one laid out in the infirmary and I have to make it up to you?”

“Hey, I’m not the one that makes the rules,” Ginny grinned and Harry smiled back, the movement felt foreign on his face.

Whatever awkwardness had been present when Harry first woke up was gone. His friends still treaded a considerate line around the more sensitive subjects of Cedric’s death, Pettigrew’s capture and Voldemort’s return, but they still managed to treat Harry like they always had and even succeeded in telling him what had been going on in the castle without receiving a complete shutdown like Remus had.

Other than Ginny, who kept a comforting grip on his hand and occasionally popped kisses on his brow, Luna, in particular, seemed to be able to be able to tell when Harry’s emotions were getting the worst of him and took the job of directing the conversation in a different direction. She was the recipient of many grateful nods which she just acknowledged with a playful twirl of her fingers around her coin necklace.

Madame Pomfrey made an appearance with a tray of food for him at around midday and was then forced to summon five more trays from a house-elf when his friends refused to leave his side, arguing that they could wait until dinner to eat. Not much talking could be done with mouths full of food and drink, but Harry didn’t care, just the fact that he had friends that weren’t willing to leave his side while he was recovering, even for an hour, said more than words ever could.

After lunch was taken care of, a game of cards was suggested, which ended up being another attempt at a house of cards, only this time they all pitched in to help. Twenty minutes later, they’d built a house fit for a king (if the king was poor and couldn’t afford proper materials, Neville joked) and Harry loved it. It was wonky, sure, it pitched a bit to the right and looked as if a sneeze would tear it down, but it was strong enough to hold its own for now and that was all Harry could offer at the moment. The others seemed to understand.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

They left at ten with promises of coming back the next day. Madame Pomfrey warded the door shut after them, aware of how precious her two charges were, and dimmed the lights in the infirmary before retiring to her own quarters. She left her bedroom door open and kept her wand close to her side as she got into her side of the bed. Out of habit, her hand swept across the other side of the bed and when she was met with nothing but cold sheets, she forced back her upset, resolved to deal with the issue in the morning.

This would be the first night that her patients would spend without the effects of a Sleeping Draught or a Dreamless Sleep potion aiding their rest. She expected a restless night for everyone.

She was woken up a total of seven times by her two patients. Moody appeared to know how to deal
with his night terrors better than Poppy had thought and waved her away after he’d successfully calmed himself down. Harry was a different matter entirely.

Her heart broke each time she heard his cries, his sobs, his screams and his pleading.

“’Ain’t nothing you can do about it now, Poppy,” grumbled Moody as she was tuck him into his bed, much to his embarrassment.

“You think I don’t know that, Alastor? I’ve been playing this game for a long time now and it still hurts like it were my first day on the job,” she said.

“What that boy needs, now more than ever, is support. No one will be able to understand exactly what he went through—his friends will try their best, but sympathy can only go so far,” Moody murmured. “He’s young, he’ll have a hard time of it, but he’ll make it through.”

Moaning had them both turning their heads in the direction of the bed next to them. Although it was covered from sight by curtains, they could still hear the sound of rustling sheets, haggard breathing, stuttered whimpering.

“Eventually.”

“Eventually,” Poppy agreed with a sigh. “And don’t think that doesn’t apply to you as well, Alastor,” she waved a wagging finger, “I’ve seen the way you deal with your own brand of demons and let me tell you, I am not impressed.”

“Whaddya want me to do, Poppy? I’m old, tired and too set in my ways. I thought I had it right, constant vigilance I’d say, but even that ended up with me on my ass, locked up in a dead man’s coffin,” Moody groaned as he leaned back on his pillow, scarred face taking on an expression of pain as the movement pulled at his injuries.

“Never too late to teach an old dog new tricks,” said Poppy, fluffing his pillow one last time. “That boy though… he’s not even an adult yet and already he knows more about life than half the people in the world. I know I shouldn’t get personally involved, but I worry about him more than I’ve worried about anyone else before… except maybe poor Remus, but he had his friends looking out for him—most of them.”

Moody suddenly stiffened and growled, “Don’t remind me. I spent years with that rat scurrying right under my nose and never so much as sniffed a thing wrong with ‘im. I tell ya, I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch Crouch if it’s the last thing I do and I’m takin’ Pettigrew with me.”

“No! Cedric—help him! Ced—don’t… NO! Stop, please!”

Poppy sighed. “I can’t argue with you on that one.”

Brief words goodnight and Poppy was standing by Harry’s bed, one hand on his shoulder shaking him awake and a cup of chamomile tea in the other hand serving as the only comfort she could give him. He woke up with a start, face drenched in his own sweat and tears, and downed the cup of tea, burning himself as he forced it down, but he didn’t say a word and turned on his side, shivering beneath the covers.

The same routine was repeated four more times that night before Harry finally passed out from sheer exhaustion at around five in the morning, only to wake up four hours later, like clockwork, just in time for breakfast. His friends would begin to arrive after breakfast and stay by his side until well into the afternoon, taking turns to ensure someone was always keeping Harry company.
However, as each day passed and Harry missed more of his queues to speak, let his eyes gloss over for more and more time, and intermittently began to lose his trail of thought mid-sentence, his friends began to pick up on the dangerous pattern and voiced their concerns, but to no avail.

Poppy had walked in one too many times on his friends or Remus (always with that dog nearby, either curled up on top of Harry's feet or snuggled into his side) gently broaching the subject on separate occasions, but Harry had become an expert at misdirection overnight and held minute long conversations in which he talked a lot without saying anything.

It came to the point that Poppy had begun to question Moody's certainty on Harry's recovery.

That is, until two days before students were bound to take the train back home.

Poppy hadn't meant to walk in on what was clearly a private moment, she really hadn't, but there she'd been, frozen solid under her doorway, arms clutched tightly around the potion bottles she'd meant to refill. At first, she thought Harry had fallen asleep in the worst position possible, bent over double on the bed with his head resting on Ginevra's lap as she sat on top of the bed.

But when she'd looked closer, taken another minute, she noticed the shaking, how his shoulders heaved irregularly, how Ginevra's hand sometimes stuttered as she ran her fingers through his hair. And then came the sounds. They were barely discernible—if she hadn't seen the couple like this, she would've thought it was the wind whistling through a crack in the window. It was a low pitched keening, it was the sound babies made after they'd calmed down from crying for a long time, little hiccups of dried tears and used sobs.

“I know it's not the same,” she heard Ginevra say, “but if anyone knows what it's like to have something inexplicably horrifying happen to you and then have no idea how to even begin to deal with, then it's the two of us.”

Poppy remembered blood on the walls, mandrakes wailing, the beds of her infirmary occupied by statues of children.

“And we're still here,” continued Ginevra. “Every breath we take is another strike to Voldemort's ass—it's more proof that he's not all-powerful. He couldn't even kill two children!”

Harry let out a wet chuckle and sat up.

“Only you would think talking about Voldemort's ass would make me feel better.”

“It did, didn't it?”

“Maybe.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

“Coz I wish I hadn't been the only one to hear that in this room,” said Harry, voice suddenly dripping in grief, “I wish Cedric was here to hear that. He's dead because of me.”

“That's not true, and somewhere in here,” Ginevra poked a finger at his chest, “you know it, too.”

She'd seen and heard enough. Poppy didn't stay to listen to Harry's response, she'd already encroached herself enough into this intimate moment, she wasn't going to tally up her crimes any higher. She took another path out of the infirmary—one which originated at her office that not even the Weasley twins knew about—all the while thinking that with Ms Weasley at his side, perhaps all was not as lost for Harry Potter as Poppy had thought.
She chose to ignore, for the moment, what it signified about this coming war that the people who have been most so far are only children.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!