### The Road Less Traveled

by Mystical_Magician

**Summary**

A strange cat and mysterious terrorist attacks in London herald the rediscovery of the Wizarding World in the midst of civil war. Wary and cautious, Sakura, Syaoran, Eriol, and Tomoyo move among the wizards in secret, making startling discoveries.

**Notes**

So, this is very old and very long. I probably won't be editing and correcting this, because of those two reasons. If you want better formatting, you might prefer to check this story out at fanfiction.net.
Two roads converged in a wood and I- 
I took the one less traveled by. 
-Robert Frost

'Your people know the roads,' the creature said. 'The roads of this world and those roads beyond 
that bind the balance. You. . . you can help me. Take my place. The hound caught me before -
before I could complete my journey. The boundaries grow thin. . . frail.'
-Charles de Lint, Dreams Underfoot, 'Romano Drom'

Once upon a time there was what there was, and if nothing had happened there would be nothing
to tell.
-Charles de Lint, Dreams Underfoot, 'The Moon Is Drowning While I Sleep'

She didn't think she would ever get used to it. The fighting and the death. The screams haunted
her dreams. The dead, bloated bodies gave her nightmares. But then, life was a nightmare. For the
wizarding world, anyway. And the poor Muggles the Death Eaters used for fun. They didn't last
long and were almost unrecognizable when found dead after prolonged torture.

The Muggle police remained baffled.

The war had been going on for over a year with no clear end in sight. Harry Potter would be
graduating in June and it was a given he would formally join the Order of the Phoenix. They had
long since given up on keeping him and his two friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, in
the dark. More often than not, Ginny Weasley joined them as well, and even, to the surprise of all,
Draco Malfoy, once bane of Harry's existence. Ginny had proved more than once to be quite
clever and had a knack for getting out of any trouble she landed herself in. And Draco was coldly
calculating and a genius at tactics and technique. Where her Gryffindors acted, he planned first,
scrutinizing it from all angles. If any of them got hurt or. . .

Minerva McGonagall didn't think she would ever get used to the unnatural deaths.

She had no illusions that the war would be over soon, only hopes and dreams that crumbled with
each name read in the obituaries, each name heard by word of mouth, until the only two pillars she
had left to depend on were Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, and even they had begun to
'crack like stone constantly worn at until one day they would collapse and leave nothing but bare
ruins. . . .

Her body was tense, all senses alert; her eyes swept the field, passing over the corpses. The sight
had once caused her to be sick, but no more. She had grown used to it since this violent war had
begun.

She automatically wondered who had fallen, which of their people had died. Sturgis Podmore, she
knew, as well as Emmeline Vance. There were at least 15 others dead this afternoon. Remus
Lupin clung to life by a mere thread as a mediwitch tended to him and Tonks might have to live
with one less finger. The unknown poison had resisted any attempt to reattach or regrow her left
pinky.

Dumbledore had taken a group of witches and wizards to defend Hogsmeade when informed of
the threat of attack. The informant, while correct about the time, had been mistaken as to the
number of Death Eaters staging the attack.
Though outnumbered, they had fought bravely and barely succeeded in turning the tide.

Realizing that they were losing, the Death Eaters had Disapparated, leaving behind an unusually large number of corpses littering the field. Several stores had been defaced and burned, windows smashed, but the damage to the stores and stock was not irreplaceable. Even as she thought this some of the more able-bodied wizards were doing a sweep, checking to make sure the enemy was truly gone.

Where had Albus gone? she wondered, looking around for the telltale silvery hair and electric blue eyes.

"Susan!" she called, spying a member of the Order and hurrying over to the younger witch. "Have you seen Dumbledore?"

She shook her head. "We've been sweeping the field and I don't recall seeing him. In fact, I haven't seen him since we were attacked."

Minerva grew worried. It wasn't like him to disappear in the middle of a fight. He was usually the one in the thick of it.

"I'm going to look for him. If Dumbledore or myself are not back in half an hour, tell Alastor he's in charge and have him do whatever he sees fit."

"All right," murmured Susan before hurrying away. "Good luck."

Minerva transformed herself into a cat and immediately regretted not waiting until she reached the edge of the forest to do it. The coppery scent of blood overwhelmed her sensitive nose and she sneezed three times in quick succession before bounding away.

She paused for a moment as soon as she reached the cover of the trees. The earthy smell mixed with pine resin relieved her nose, and she circled the field; passing a sentry, she flicked her tail in acknowledgement as she searched for the point at which Dumbledore had entered the forest. The chances that he had simply Disapparated were slim.

The further she went, the harder it was to stifle her worries.

Finally, about 10 minutes later and almost directly across from where she'd started, she had him. His unique scent, difficult to describe in human terms, led deeper into the forest. Minerva followed it, the loam-covered forest floor helping her to move with a ghostly silence. The forest dimmed the light of the sun, but her cat's eyes saw clearly.

She soon heard the murmur of men's voices and her ears twitched, trying to identify the location. Veering slightly to the left she trotted silently as the noise grew in volume. Very little light penetrated the branches of the trees here, making it seem like dusk rather than late afternoon. Minerva was soon able to understand the individual words. It sounded like Albus was in the middle of a duel.

She was stopped momentarily by a large tangle of thorny bushes, but solved the problem by jumping onto a low branch above them and crouched there, watching the two men below her.

Minerva recognized Dumbledore's opponent immediately and her fur stood on end. What had been so important about the battle for Hogsmeade that it had warranted Voldemort's attention? Perhaps they had planned to use it as a base to launch an attack on Hogwarts? Albus must have lured him away from the battlefield before our side could panic, she hypothesized.

They were evenly matched. The last traces of a yellow mist clung to Voldemort and what seemed
to be shards of glass or crystal were scattered on the ground around Dumbledore.

The Dark Lord was deflecting a jet of light with a shield when Dumbledore stumbled over a hidden tree root. Despite his best efforts, his wand flew out of his hand.

Voldemort stepped on the wand, snapping it in two before Albus could even attempt to grab it.

"Well, well, well," he said. "This is the last time you play the fool, Dumbledore." Leveling his wand at the older wizard, point-blank, red eyes gleaming in triumph, he said, "Avada Ke-"

With an audible hiss, Minerva launched herself at the Dark Lord's arm, claws extended.

He let out an enraged shout as the Killing Curse shot out wide and violently flung her away from him.

"Minerva!" Albus bellowed as she hit a tree and rolled to the ground as a woman, the shock and pain of the impact causing her to lose her grip on her cat form. Her hair flew out of its normal bun and within the curtain of ebony and silver hair she glared at Albus, warning him without words to stay back.

He needs my wand, Minerva thought. Albus is the only wizard Voldemort is afraid of.

"We finally meet face-to-face, Minerva McGonagall. What a pity such a meeting will be so short-lived."

She turned to Voldemort just in time as he shouted "Diffindo!"

Rolling to the side to avoid the spell, she used the motion to disguise the toss of her wand, then clamped her hands to her side. Her robes were dark and sticky with blood. She hadn't fully escaped the spell.

A glance at Albus showed that her wand had fallen short. He was scrambling for it as quietly as he could in a patch of nettles and thorns, ignoring the pain.

Determined to keep the Dark Lord's attention away from Dumbledore, Minerva plunged her hand into her robes, pretending to go for her wand. He was quicker than she thought and the Cruciatius Curse hit her before she could dodge it.

Her screams echoed throughout the forest. Minerva had never felt pain as intense as what she was feeling now. The gash on her side was nothing in comparison to this. It was as if white-hot knives were twisting and turning within her skin, and the pain seemed to go on for eternity. She was going to go mad. She was going to go mad if she wasn't already.

Out, let me out, get me away, far, far away, her mind clamored senselessly. A smaller target to avoid it, let me out, get me far, far away, away, away, out. Her thoughts were becoming incoherent.

Albus Dumbledore's heart was in his throat as he frantically searched for Minerva's wand, spots of blood dotting his hand from the scratches of the thorns. Why she had tossed it at him was beyond his ability to reason. Now she had nothing to defend herself with.

Minerva's screams resounded in his ears, and his relief was immense when his long fingers finally wrapped around the smooth mahogany wood of her wand.

Albus turned to face the pair and the sight of his Deputy on the ground, writhing in pain made his
blood boil. However, before he could curse Voldemort, Minerva disappeared. She was simply... gone.

The two experienced wizards, against their better judgment, froze for a moment, surprised. Then, "Explo Crato!"

Voldemort Disapparated before the curse reached him. There was a large explosion and when the smoke and dust cleared a crater could be seen where the Dark Lord had been standing. Seconds later Moody and three other Aurors appeared with a 'pop', wands ready.

"Dumbledore?" said Moody, his magic eye swiveling around in a 360° circle. "What's going on?"

"In a moment," the Headmaster replied absently, a hint of steel in his voice as he cast every Locator Spell he knew. The results were the same for each one. Minerva McGonagall was no longer in Scotland, nor in the countries immediately surrounding it.

Dumbledore turned to Moody. "Alastor, get everyone back to the school. Minerva has disappeared and I want her found as soon as possible."

Pushing his questions to the back of his mind, knowing that now was not the time to ask, Mad-Eye Moody barked orders to his companions and in a surprisingly short time everyone had returned to Hogwarts.

18-year-old Sakura Kinomoto had definitely grown in the past nine years. At 5' 6 1/2" she was only a head shorter than her older brother. Her brown hair streaked with gold highlights ended at least an inch below her shoulders, and she still managed to retain her constant cheerfulness and innocence of childhood.

Sakura had grown into her powers as well. Her luminous green eyes and powerful aura occasionally betrayed her, drawing others in and offering glimpses of hidden power, an old soul, secret knowledge. They would shake it off, laugh at themselves, and dismiss it as their imagination, though a few would wonder and dream.

Eriol hid it with his enigmatic smiles, Syaoran with his glares. Sakura couldn't hide her immense powers completely. It always showed itself at least twice a year. Tomoyo liked to call it the 'glimpse into Faerie.'

She didn't like to depend on her magic, but she did practice and train when she could.

Sakura had also developed a rather wicked sense of humor, which occasionally made itself known. Syaoran said it was inevitable after spending so much time with 'camera-girl' (Tomoyo), 'the Devil' (Eriol), and 'those damn kitsune demons' (Tomoe's only kitsune family, who resided in Penguin Park). She often told him that he wasn't up to his usual standard of insults. Her exact words were, "You're getting soft in your old age."

Syaoran had yet to keep from spluttering indignantly.

Sakura was on her way home from waitressing when she felt a strange magic flare in Penguin Park.

"Hoe," Sakura murmured to herself and sprinted across the empty street and into the dark woods, mentally calling upon Glow to light her way. The moon shed no light tonight.

The ever-present carpet of leaves and twigs crackled under foot, and her backpack pounding her back with every step she took, urging her onward. Upon reaching the area the flare had come from she slowed to a walk, clutching the Star Key.
There was a rustling to her left and Sakura froze.

Carefully she knelt and pushed a few bushes to the side. She sighed with relief when she saw it was a cat. It mewed plaintively as she was about to let go of the plants and all thoughts of Sakura’s search flew from her head when she noticed the blood matting its fur.

“Oh you poor thing,” Sakura murmured, reaching for the cat. She quickly withdrew her arm as it made a feeble swipe, claws extended.

Thinking quickly, she took off her sweatshirt and wrapped the cat in it gently, noticing it was female, before picking her up. “Did someone beat you?” she asked quietly, trying to calm her as she struggled weakly.

Afraid the cat was going to hurt herself, Sakura cast a sleep spell and then teleported the two of them to the front door of her home.

"Otousan! Otousan!" she called, foregoing her usual "Tadaima" as she burst through the door, trying not to jolt her unconscious charge.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs and two men appeared.

"Daijoubu? Nani desu ka?" Kinomoto Fujitaka asked worriedly.

Touya, visiting from college, looked frantic. "Daijoubu desu ka? You're not hurt, are you?"

Sakura shook her head impatiently. "Not me, the cat. If I don't do something fast, she's going to die!"

"Bring her into the dining room. Touya get warm water and a towel," ordered Fujitaka, quickly taking control of the situation. Leading the way, into the dining room, he sterilized the table with a wave of his hand before having his daughter place the tabby cat on it.

"I found her in the park on the way back from work," Sakura explained, anxiously watching her father examine the cat. "There was a flare of unknown magic, but she distracted me. I'll need to check the park out tomorrow. Neko wa daijoubu desu ka?"

"Arigatou," her father said to Touya when he returned with the towels and water, before turning to his daughter. "The cut is easily healed, but there is a lot of internal damage." He soaked a towel and began cleaning the dirt and dried blood from the wound. "It's better," he continued, "for the damage to heal naturally, as the body knows better what to do than you or I. However, if we don't help her it's likely she sill die."

"Maybe if I sped up the healing process," suggested Sakura timidly, "but leave the actual healing to her body?"

"An excellent suggestion," said Fujitaka. Running a finger along the gash, he healed it and then left the rest to Sakura.

Sakura laid her hands on the small furry body and murmured soothing words to the unconscious cat as she powered the natural healing of the body to five times its normal sped. The two figures glowed softly until Sakura broke the connection blinking away her tiredness. "She'll be fully healed in three or four days," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes and stifling a yawn.

"There's a basket in the kitchen and a spare blanket in the closet," Touya offered gruffly.
"Arigatou. I need to put my sweatshirt in the wash first," Sakura said ruefully.

"Daijoubu. I'll take care of it" said Fujitaka.

"Arigatou gozaimasu," Sakura called over her shoulder, cradling the small body to her chest.

Touya sighed as she headed into the kitchen. "That's the second stray animal this week that she's brought home to heal."

"The squirrel had been raked by a hawk," said Fujitaka as they heard Sakura rush up the stairs. "I'm sure this was deliberate, that a human being inflicted the injuries on that poor cat."

They were silent for a moment.

"Did that cat seem strange to you?" Touya asked finally.

"Hai. I didn't notice at first, but there is something. . . mezurashii. . . ." Sakura passed by the door once more on the way to the stairs, balancing a basket and blanket in one hand, and the animal in the other. She hummed to the sleeping tabby softly.

Once in her room she switched on the light and arranged the soft blue blanket inside it before laying the cat inside. "Oyasumi nasai," she murmured cheerfully.

Behind her she heard the quiet snick of wood on wood and turned to see a small yellow stuffed animal in the likeness of a bear with white sings float out of her now open bottom drawer.

"Konbanwa, Sakura-san," came the sleepy Osaka accented voice. "Nani desu ka?"

"Konbanwa, Kero-chan. Neko ni imasu. There was a flare of foreign magic and I found her in Penguin Park. She was hurt badly, so I helped her. I'll find out who did a spell tomorrow morning."

"Another stray?" asked Kero, absently frowning in concentration as he stretched his awareness to probe the auras in the park. "I don't sense anything out of the ordinary. You might not find anything by tomorrow, though I suppose you could always recreate a vision of the past."

"This time it was deliberate!" exclaimed Sakura heatedly, causing Kero to blink in confusion until he recalled his first comment. "Even if she was wearing a collar I wouldn't return her to the owner!"

"Hai, hai," soothed Kero placatingly. It wasn't smart to make the most powerful sorceress in the world angry. "Neko no name wa nan desu ka?" What is the cat's name?

"Shiranai." I don't know

He face-faulted. "Well, she needs a name."

"Hmmm," said Sakura, eyes unfocused as she concentrated on finding a fitting name.

"Tabby-chan," she said finally.

Kero cocked his head to one side. "That feels. . . right somehow."

"Kero-chan, I was thinking that maybe you should stay with Tomoyo-chan for the next four days, preferably the next week, until Tabby-chan recovers fully. You don't really get along with cats-"
Kero let out an indignant snort.

"Cats don't get along well with you," she amended quickly. "And besides, Tomoyo-chan always has sweets ready for you. She also told me she has some new video games."

"Of course I would do what my Mistress asks of me," Kero reassured her. "I wouldn't like to get in the way of your patient's health. I would be delighted to keep Tomoyo-san company." And without further ado he flew out the open window into the night air, muttering to himself about pudding and whether he should go with chocolate cake, strawberry napoleon cake, or the beautiful, delicate teacakes to begin with.

Sakura grinned to herself as she watched his form silhouetted against the moon and stars. Stifling a yawn she glanced at the time. The hands showed 11:35 and she sighed, tossing on her pajamas and heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth. At least school was out, the last day having been four days ago, Friday April 9th.

Finished, she glanced at Tabby before climbing under the bed covers, falling asleep almost immediately.

I feel like I'm forgetting to do something, was her last sleepy thought before turning off the light.

Moonlight shone through the windows, gently illuminating the features of the sleeping girl and throwing the cat, as well as the rest of the room, into shadows. They hid the details and designs, part of the room's character, just as the Cardmistress hid her title and magic from the rest of the world.

Just as the cat guarded secrets that could either save or destroy the world she knew and the world of the Muggles.

Sakura was rudely awoken by a loud ringing.

Moaning, she opened her eyes halfway before hurriedly shutting them to block out the bright morning sunlight. Rolling over, Sakura flung out an arm to turn off her alarm clock, only to realize that it wasn't making that horrible, annoying, loud, racket.

Realizing she wouldn't be going back to sleep any time soon, she rolled heavily out of bed and glanced around the room, finally spotting her cell phone on the desk. Who would be awake at, she squinted at her clock, 8:30 AM?

"Moshi moshi." Her voice was slurred with sleep and she frowned at the basket next to her bed. What was that for? "Kinomoto Sa-Sakura desu." A yawn interrupted her in the middle of her standard greeting.

"Moshi moshi, Sakura-chan," came the familiar musical voice.

"Tomoyo-chan?" she asked hazily.

Oh yes, the cat. Sakura wondered how Tabby was doing and padded softly over to the basket. She was delighted when she saw her eyes open in slits before closing once more.

Green eyes just like me, she thought as Tabby's breathing deepened into a regular pattern.

"Gomen nasai," said Sakura realizing that Tomoyo had been talking. "What did you say?"

She could hear the grin in her best friend's voice as Tomoyo said in a teasing way, "Thinking about a certain amber-eyed Chinese boy?"
Sakura blushed. "Tomoyo-chaaaaaan! I was not! I found an injured cat in the park last night and she just opened her eyes for a second."

"Kero-chan told me about that," acknowledged Tomoyo. "I just wanted to let you know that he made it here-"

"Oh, I knew I'd forgotten something! I meant to call and ask last night, Tomoyo-chan, but I fell asleep."

"Daijoubu. Don't worry about it. I would have called you last night, but it was rather late when he got here."

Sakura could make out Kero's voice in the background.

"I called earlier than usual because Kero-chan wanted to remind you to check the unknown spell's location."

"Oh, yes. Do you want to come over when I get back? Oniichan doesn't go back to college until Doyoubi, so I'll ask him to watch Tabby-chan. If I'm not back before you get here he can let you in."

"Okay. Yukito-san didn't come to visit?"

"No," replied Sakura. "He took an extra class, so he couldn't leave."

"Mmm hmm. Ja ne. See you in a while."

"Ja ne."

She pushed the off button and set the phone down before kneeling by the slumbering tabby cat and stroking her soft fur. "You should be well enough to take a bath tomorrow," she mused to herself. "I doubt you'll like that." Sakura chuckled as she examined Tabby's aura to check for any signs of suffering, something she had neglected to do the night before. What she saw surprised her greatly. Sakura had never seen anything with a silver aura. Granted, she rarely looked at anyone's aura aside from those of her family, friends, and classmates but still.

And another thing. Tabby's aura was precise and controlled, without the pulsing and sparking that resulted from animal instincts and untrained magic.

The most puzzling thing about her was the tangled dark silver weavings of a spell that glowed just under her skin in an unknown pattern that seemed extraordinarily complex one moment, and so upside down, backwards, and deceptively simple the next that it gave her a headache. It didn't seem particularly powerful, just strange and...confusing.

"Was it you I felt last night?" Sakura said aloud as she changed into jeans and a light blue shirt with the word CLAMP scrawled across the chest and their logo beneath it. Not for the first time she wondered what it meant, but she had more pressing matters at hand.

"Ohayo," she called upon entering the kitchen.

"Oyaho gozaimasu," returned her father from his place at the able.

"Ohayo, Kaijuu," came her brother's usual greeting.

She kicked him on the way passed, satisfied with his grimace of pain.
"Watashi wa kaijuu ni imasen," I'm not a monster she informed him frostily as she grabbed a piece of toast and headed for the door.

"I'm going to check out Penguin Park, but I think Tabby-chan was the source of the flare, or had something to do with it. There's something strange about her," she informed them in a loud voice as she grabbed her roller blades.

There was a brief silence and she held the toast in her mouth as she buckled her blades.

"Dare?" asked Touya.

"Neko," Sakura informed him shortly around a mouthful of toast. "I don't think we should use or even talk about our magic. She doesn't see malignant, but just in case."

"Don't worry," her father reassured her as he walked to the door to see her off. "We won't."

Sakura stood a bit unsteadily. "Oniichan, watch Tabby-chan!" she shouted to him before pushing off with smooth, graceful movements.

"Ittekimasu!" she called, skating backwards a short distance along the sidewalk, one arm raised in farewell. She heard the answering, "Itterasshai," as she turned to face forward and sped off down a side road lined with sakura trees in full bloom.

Kirei na, she thought dreamily, blading steadily toward the park. Spring was definitely her favorite season, a time of new beginnings.

Sakura giggled as she brushed a sakura blossom out of her medium-length brown hair, and another off her shirt. They were everywhere.

The steady pumping of her legs and quiet air lent a hypnotic quality to the mood. Her contemplations turned to Tomoyo's comment about Syaoran on the phone. He had moved to Tomoeda permanently when they were in middle school, staying in the same apartment as he had when she had been capturing and converting Clow Cards. Occasionally Syaoran was required to return to Hong Kong to help with Li clan business and to visit with his family. That was where he was not, though he said he'd be back in a few days.

Kami-sama, she missed him.

Her arrival at Penguin Park's slide brought her out of her reverie and she circled the park once before gliding over the trails through it. The beauty of blooming trees and flowers, of morning sunshine on emerald green grass, sparkling off of the dew drops, was pushed to the back of her mind as she examined the grounds. A faint trace of silver where she'd found Tabby, present only to those with the Sight, was the only thing out of the ordinary. Sakura stared blankly at the bushes from a nearby path as early morning joggers and dog walkers passed her, sometimes with a nod and a smile.

Sighing, Sakura decided to head home. No matter how deeply she Looked, the only presence was Tabby's slowly dissipating over time.

Oblivious to everything around her, she glided over cement, her body automatically bringing her to her front door.

"Tadaima!" she greeted, carrying her skates to the closet.
"Okaeri nasai," replied Tomoyo as Sakura stepped into the kitchen.

"Tomoyo-chan?" The Cardmistress glanced at the clock and saw she'd been gone for nearly an hour. "Ah! Gomen nasai. I didn't realize it would take so long."

"It's all right. I haven't been here long," Tomoyo replied placidly. "Kero-chan lost at a rather crucial point in his game as I was leaving and it took some time to reassure my maids and prove to them a strange man was no hiding in any of my rooms, closets, or wardrobes."

Sakura giggled. "I suppose I should apologize for that as well."

Tomoyo waved a hand at her. "It's no problem really. He's a good cure for boredom. So good that one might wish for boredom, actually."

The two friends laughed.

"Where's Oniichan?" Sakura asked as they mounted the stairs.

"In his room working on a report."

Sakura snorted. "And he gets on my case for leaving homework until the last minute." She lowered her voice as she opened the door to her room. "Tabby-chan hasn't fully woken up yet," Sakura informed Tomoyo as they knelt by the cat's makeshift bed. "There's something unusual about her. I think she was the source of foreign power I sensed last night."

"So you don't want anyone to speak about or use magic in front of her until you know more about her?" guessed Tomoyo.

Sakura stared at her. "Hoeeee. You're observant to the point of reading minds, Tomoyo-chan."

Tomoyo laughed. "I just know you too well. Oh, look. Tabby-chan is waking up." She smiled and stroked the furry head as she blinked up at her owlishly. Tomoyo froze as the green eyes held her own violet orbs.

"Daijoubu?" Sakura asked her.

"Sakura-chan," Tomoyo breathed, "there's human intelligence in her gaze; there's an understanding and pain, fear and sorrow... hope."

She blinked as if coming out of a trance. "There is certainly something unusual about this cat. Do you think she's hungry?"

This abrupt change in topic didn't affect Sakura and she leapt to her feet. "I don't have any cat food!" she exclaimed.

"I doubt she'd eat it anyway," said Tomoyo pointedly as Tabby struggled to her feet and ambled around the room on unsteady feet, exploring her new surroundings.

"Right," she said. "I'll get toast. Would you mind watching her? Do you want anything?"

Tomoyo shook her head, gazing thoughtfully at the tabby cat. "I'm fine," she replied as her cousin slipped out of the room. "You are a puzzle." She directed this last comment at Tabby, who stared at her nonplused, head cocked to one side.

"It's lucky Sakura-chan found you," Tomoyo continued, reaching out to pet her. "You probably would have died, you know."
Tabby tensed and shook herself.

"No," agreed Tomoyo. "That isn't a good thought."

Minerva slowly returned to consciousness and became aware of a hushed conversation between two females.

". . . chikara. . . . . 

". . . mahou. . . shimasen."

It took her several moments to realize the words were Japanese and some time after that to remember the events that had taken place. . . how long ago? How long had she slept?

She opened her eyes and met the gaze of a raven-haired, violet-eyed girl, who rattled off several sentences in Japanese to her companion. They both looked to be about the same age as Hogwarts' seventh years.

Had she been a woman she would have frowned. Concentrate, she told herself. It had been years since she'd last spoken Japanese. She knew it had been unusual for a Scottish woman to learn it, but now it seemed that that knowledge would be put to good use, if Japanese was this household's language.

Minerva struggled out of the basket she'd been put in and examined the room. Where in the world was she? How had she gotten here? And how had she ended up in her Animagus form? So many mysteries.

The girl she had first seen began talking and Minerva turned to watch her, concentrating on what she was saying. It surprised her that she could understand the language so easily.

"You are a puzzle."

So is everything else, Minerva thought wryly.

"It's lucky Sakura-chan found you."

That must be the girl who left to get food, she reasoned. She had definitely been lucky to be taken in and cared for.

"You probably would have died, you know."

Minerva couldn't help herself. The thought of how close she had been to dying made her shudder. Though she was in much less pain than she thought she should have been in, it still pained her to move.

"No, that's not a good thought."

Just then the other girl - Sakura? - returned.

"Ohayo gozaimasu, Tabby-chan," she said cheerfully. I brought you some food."

Minerva hadn't realized how hungry she was, but the use of her old nickname floored her. She hadn't been called Tabby for years.

An interesting coincidence, she thought as she bit into the buttered toast. At least they weren't trying to feed her cat food.
Minerva flicked an ear in the two girls’ direction.

"Are you sure you don't want anything, Tomoyo-chan?"

Tomoyo. She stored that name in her memory.

This must be Sakura's house, she guessed from how Sakura played the hostess.

"Iie. I ate before I left."

Despite herself, Minerva felt herself grow sleepy and yawned hugely the moment she finished the last bite of toast. It served as a reminder that she hadn't quite recovered from Voldemort's attention.

I do hope Albus got away all right, she thought worriedly before crawling into the basket and curling into a tight ball, head to tail. She appreciated it when Tomoyo and Sakura quietly stood and turned off the lights as they left.

They were nice girls.

Minerva woke several hours later, restless and disoriented from a nightmare. The image lingered in her mind: a bodiless head, covered in rich red blood, a stark contrast to the ashen skin. Maggots infested the empty eye sockets, the movements sickening her. In her mind's eye she could clearly see uneven cut of the skin of the neck that hung limply in tatters, dry blood encrusted on the ends. The clear, minute details soon faded, as dreams are wont to do, the vivid details unable to be recalled. While that was unnerving, what truly scared her was the familiarity with which she regarded the victim.

Death plagued her dreams when visions of peaceful times were too weak to stifle Hades' creatures. The few other witches and wizards she'd talked to about it had similar trouble.

The murmur of voices coming from the floor below comforted her, calming her racing heart. The clock showed 6:24 and she supposed Sakura and her family were eating dinner.

Feeling hungry, Minerva trotted over to the door, noticing it was left ajar. She was extremely grateful for the thoughtfulness of this Japanese-speaking family. She couldn't smell any other animals which was too bad. They would have made wonderful owners.

She did, however, smell yakisoba, one of her favorite Japanese foods. After all, one couldn't learn a language without absorbing some of the culture.

Minerva padded softly into the kitchen, allowing her nose to guide her. Three people sat at the table, one of which was Sakura. She supposed the older, brown-haired man was her father. Perhaps the raven-haired young man next to him was Sakura's brother? Or maybe a friend? She was more willing to believe he was her brother, seeing as how he was several years older.

"Konbanwa, Tabby-chan," acknowledged Sakura, noticing her as she hovered in the doorway. The conversation hesitated for a moment before the young man rose to get a bowl and ladled yakisoba into it before setting it on the floor next to the table, drawing her to Sakura's side.

"Good idea, Touya-san," praised Sakura's father.

Minerva sniffed the food before delicately taking a bite. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd interrupted an important conversation they didn't want her to hear.

Touya returned with a saucer of milk and Minerva gave herself a small shake. Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Why would they worry about talking openly in front of a cat? No, this Muggle
family was perfectly normal, aside from the fact that the mother wasn't present. She was probably still at work.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't noticed a recent female scent that could be attributed to their mother. Sad as the prospect was, the mother had to either be dead or long gone. Still that wasn't too unusual as families go.

But, thought Minerva, absently chewing her food, there's something unusual in the air, a subtle, unknown feeling.

If only she knew where she was! That was frustrating her almost as much as not knowing what was going on in her world. Wouldn't it be a nice surprise if I returned only to find Voldemort in charge of everything? she thought sarcastically before quickly stifling it, as if by thinking it, it would come true.

Only pretending to do what a normal cat would do - or so she told herself - Minerva leapt lightly onto Sakura's lap and curled herself up into a ball. She was rewarded for the action by Sakura's comforting stroking. She purred, eyes slipping closed. For a while, at least, there would be peace, and she could relax. For a while she could forget about the warring and the killing. For a while she could forget that she was a witch in cat's clothing.

Sakura smiled down at Tabby, gently rubbing the fur on her back and head. "You're quite a mystery, Tabby-chan," she murmured softly, before looking up.

"Gochisosama. May I be excused?" she asked.

"Of course," replied Fujitaka.

Sakura stood up slowly, without waking Tabby, and floated her dishes over to the sink where they settled with a quiet clatter. It had taken her weeks to be able to do that without dropping or breaking anything.

"Kaijuu," said Touya as he stared at the contents of the refrigerator. "We have dessert and it's been abnormally quiet. Where's the nuigurumi?"

"At Tomoyo-chan's," replied Sakura shortly, bristling at the 'kaijuu' comment and heading upstairs. "I didn't want him disturbing Tabby-chan."

Sakura set the sleeping cat in her makeshift bed before changing into her pajamas and dialing Tomoyo's phone number, muttering all the while about mean older brothers who think they can say whatever they want just because they're bigger, and if she hadn't been holding Tabby -

"Moshi, moshi. Daidouji Tomoyo desu."

"Ah! Konbanwa Tomoyo-chan. How are you holding up with Kero-chan?"

"His shouting is somewhat attention-getting but no mishaps so far," replied Tomoyo.

"That's good. You can always send him back here if it gets to be too much," said Sakura. She could hear blasting noises in the background, which could only mean that Kero was playing video games and had completely taken over the TV.

"It's fine," Tomoyo reassured her. "The maids are getting suspicious, I think, but when he gets too noisy I stuff his mouth full of cake."
Sakura laughed. "I should try that next time. Although I don't think we'd have enough to succeed," she added as an afterthought.

She assumed Kero wasn't paying the slightest attention to the conversation since there wasn't any indignant shouting.

"What I wanted to ask," continued Sakura, "was what time you were planning to have the picnic on Friday. I sort of... er... forgot."

She fidgeted uncomfortably as her best friend giggled.

"1:00," replied Tomoyo finally. "then you can come over to my house afterwards and try on the new clothes I made you!"

Sakura could practically see the fanatical gleam in her eyes and suppressed a sigh. She was sure that that hadn't been mentioned before, but didn't protest. She fervently believed that it would be easier to talk Kero out of eating sweets, and everyone knew that was impossible.

The two of them talked until Tomoyo began to enthusiastically describe new and - in Sakura's opinion - extremely wild and conspicuous battle costumes. At that point she suddenly noticed that it was very late (9:12) and she was very tired and she had to wrestle a (weak and injured) cat into a bathtub and keep her there tomorrow morning.

"Oyasumi nasai."

"Oyasumi nasai," echoed Tomoyo in a somewhat disappointed voice before they hung up.

Sakura stared at the basin of warm water as if it was her death sentence.

"You look more vacant than usual," remarked Touya on his way past her as he left for work. Fujitaka had left earlier that morning for a lecture.

Sakura considered throwing the basin at him, but decided it would be too much of a hassle and, instead, screeched, "Oniichaaaaan!" at the top of her lungs in the most annoying, grating voice she could manage.

"Don't forget your raincoat!" he called back, slamming the door as he muttered, "Harpy," under his breath.

"I heard that," came the disembodied voice from right next to his ear.

Touya beat a strategic retreat before Sakura decided to take offensive with her magic.

"I don't like getting wet in my clothes," Sakura muttered blackly.

"Mreow?"

She turned at the sound and greeted the feline that sat at the bottom of the stairs, watching her curiously.

"I'm giving you a bath," said Sakura shortly. "Please don't splash me too much."

Minerva flinched as she was lowered into the warm water and resisted the urge to scratch and claw her way away from the bath. It was just - well, yes, heavenly, but - alright, she knew she needed one, wanted one, but... She was a cat, dammit! This just wasn't dignified! Cats don't like water, and she knew for a fact that she looked like a drowned rat. The indignity of it all.
If she so much as attempts to wash me, I will scratch her, thought Minerva mutinously as she crouched in the water, aristocratic manners gone the way of her sunny disposition.

Sakura blinked at the passive cat, wondering if it was normal for a feline to just sit in the tub without attempting to escape.

She changed her plans at the last minute, casting a spell on the water so that it would clean Tabby. There was something too intelligent about those green eyes for Sakura to feel comfortable washing her by hand.

Interesting, mused Minerva when Sakura picked her up and wrapped her in a towel. Not that I'm unhappy, but why didn't she attempt to wash me?

Oh, not again! she thought crossly as her muscles seemed to go limp. She trembled as a wave of exhaustion hit her. I hate being ill and injured, but it shouldn't last so long, even recovering from the Crucius Curse. I must still be replenishing my energy from the wandless magic I did to get here... Wherever here is. I can't have gotten further than Edinburgh, but there are so many towns within that radius.

After much thought Minerva had concluded that she had unknowingly Disapparated from the clearing. The need and desperation had taken that place of her wand and pulled a powerful spell out of her to get away; far, far away.

But why hadn't Albus or someone come to get her? Surely they didn't believe she was dead?

They were busy, she concluded, trying to ignore the lump in her throat. They had Voldemort and his army to worry about. She'd have to find her own way home once she recovered. They needed her help, needed all the help they could get, for Voldemort was slowly gaining ground as they lost it.

"Alastor, where is she?"

'Mad-Eye' Moody watched Albus pace his office restlessly. They had spent three fruitless days searching for Minerva McGonagall since her disappearance. They had used every spell Alastor knew and even a few he didn't, and though they located the correct people during the test runs, Minerva hadn't shown up at all, which she should have even if she were - Merlin forbid it - dead. It was as if she'd disappeared off the face of the Earth.

"Voldemort can't have her or he'd have flaunted that fact in our faces, and, besides, Severus told us Voldemort wished them to find her before we did. Alastor, " Albus stopped and fixed the ex-Auror with a piercing gaze, "we need to get to her before they do."

"Dumbledore, we're limited to searching the Muggle way. It would help if we knew why her location doesn't appear in any spell."

"I don't know!" exclaimed Albus in such a tense and frustrated tone that Alastor immediately focused both eyes (the magical one had been roving as per usual) on the Headmaster. He had never heard the older wizard sound so... so helpless, so at loss as to what to do.

"I'm sure she's find," said Moody gruffly. "I feel more sorry for whoever's found her. Poppy says Minerva only stops short of holding her at wand-point when she's injured or sick and believes herself to be fine."

Albus chuckled. "She does have a temper." I only hope she'll be able to use it on me again.
Dumbledore's eyes grew unfocused as he gazed into the crackling fire and Alastor quietly took his leave.

Another day passed and Minerva was well enough to stay awake for more than three hours at a time. As of yet she had been unable to discover what city she was in, but she had her eyes set on a letter Sakura had received that morning. She seemed to be in a happy mood (well, happier than usual), since having read the letter and Minerva was curious as to what it said, but her good conscience wouldn't allow her to read someone else's mail.

She watched Sakura flip through a small deck of large pink cards, silently willing her to leave. It seemed her prayers had been answered when the phone rang and the teenager went pelting out of the room and down the stairs, still holding the cards.

Minerva wasted no time in leaping onto the desk. She pawed through the papers until she came to the envelope, and studied the name to make sure it had been addressed to Sakura. The kanji characters returned to her memory easily, as if the language had been eagerly waiting over 20 years for just such an occasion. Having confirmed it was addressed to Sakura Kinomoto, she skipped down to the line that contained the city.

To... Tomoe... da? Tomoeda? Had she not been a cat she would have frowned. I've never heard of Tomoeda.

Minerva turned to jump down from the desk when the characters for the country caught her eye. She did a double take.

Japan?!

Forgetting herself, she let out a yowl. She realized what a fool she'd been. Why would a letter be addressed in Japanese if she were still in Scotland, or even on that side of the world? Even people in the International District addressed letters in English, and the lack of noise and pollution and traffic said better than anything that she was not in the District.

"Tabby-chan?" asked a soft voice from the doorway. "Daijoubu?"

Minerva started, remembered where she was, and jumped to the ground.

How had she gotten the power to Apparate to the other side of the world without a wand? No wonder she had been - and still was - so exhausted.

"C'mon Tabby-chan," said Sakura gently, picking her up and stroking her. "Would you like some fresh air? No not you," she added, and Minerva saw that she cradled a cordless phone on her shoulder.

"Yes, I know you're shut up in a room all day, learning the Li Clan leader position, but there's nothing I can do about it. . ."

". . . Well, that wouldn't be polite. Besides, there's a whole mansion full of sor-. . ."

". . . Yes, I know you'll back me up, but you'll be home soon anyway. . ."

". . . Mou. That's mean Syaoran-kun. I've been waiting forever for you to come back, and now you won't give me the date of your return? . . ."

". . . Just because I won't bail you out. . ."

". . . Well, you're supposed to be the fearless leader . . ."

Minerva sighed. It was rather frustrating and confusing to listen to a one-sided conversation. But the more pressing matter was, how could she get back to England? She didn't know any Japanese witches or wizards, nor did she know of any magical communities. It was sheer dumb luck that she was fluent in Japanese.

"Hoe!!"

Minerva jumped, accidentally clawing Sakura's arms.

"Mmmph!" Sakura bit her lip and clutched her forearm.

I'm sorry! Minerva thought as she butt her head against Sakura's legs. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

"Don't worry, Tabby-chan," she reassured the cat. "I'm okay." She pulled her sleeve up to check the scratches. They had already stopped bleeding, the skin closing and healing. Sorcerers healed twice as fast as normal people, but the rule didn't apply to sickness and disease.

"But we're going to be laaaate!" Sakura wailed, and immediately resumed her panicky activity, rushing around the room. "I'm supposed to be at the park right now!"

Teleporting was out of the question with Tabby-chan there.

She sped down the stairs with Minerva on her heels, wondering what was going on. In record time Sakura had grabbed her jacket, shoes, a bento box in a bag, and, to Minerva's surprise, herself.

Sakura's bike was leaning against the porch and she gently stowed the cat in the basket between the handlebars and strapped the bento to the platform behind the seat before hopping on.

Minerva moaned the moment the jolting ride began. Her claws punctured the basket as she strove to keep herself steady and upright. It seemed an eternity before the ride was over and she could have sworn she'd been tossed into the air at least once.

"Gomen nasai, Tomoyo-chan," Sakura panted. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"No, no," reassured Tomoyo. "It's fine. Although I can't say the same for your neko."

I'm not hers, Minerva thought with as much indignance as possible while desperately trying not to be sick.

"Tabby-chan!" exclaimed Sakura, placing the feline on the ground. "Ah! Gomen nasai, Tabby-chan! I wasn't thinking!"

Twenty points from...from...

Minerva shook herself and then grudgingly twined around Sakura's legs to show that she was forgiven.

"You know," said the brunette thoughtfully, calming down. "This is where I found Tabby-chan."

"Really?" said Tomoyo as she set the food on a blanket for their picnic.

Minerva immediately studied her surroundings, wondering if she could somehow get back home.
from here. As the two girls ate (occasionally feeding the feline some tidbits) she explored the area. Aside from the faint smell of old blood and a vague scent resembling that of a fox or two, she could find nothing unusual. Part of it could have been attributed to the overpowering smell of the food, and she decided to return at a later date, just in case she had missed something. Feeling rather selfish, Minerva desperately wished that Albus were here to help her. She couldn't get back to Hogwarts without a wand. She was lonely for the company of people who knew her, people she had known for years, and people who could do magic as she could.

And aside from that she was afraid. Afraid of never returning; afraid of being unable to help; afraid of leaving the children; afraid of exposing the Wizarding World to the Muggles; afraid of never - . She scrambled to her feet when she noticed Sakura packing the empty bento box onto her bicycle. Afraid of another ride on that terror!

What happened to my bloody Gryffindor courage? she thought with a moan.

This time, however, Sakura pedaled slowly, coasting along the quiet roads, hair flying back away from her face.

Minerva savored the peace that these people took for granted, wishing that the state of the Wizarding World was half as quiet.

"Sit down, Weasley. You're making me nauseous," ordered Draco, who had been watching Ron pace back and forth in the past 15 minutes since Harry and Hermione had gone to sneak around Hogwarts under an Invisibility Cloak (they now had two thanks to Hermione, a complex Duplication Charm, and the Room of Requirement) and look for something - anything - that would explain Professor McGonagall's absence.

Ever since McGonagall had disappeared the school seemed to be blanketed in an unnatural silence. Students whispered in the halls, and whatever laughter there was was unnatural and loud, and quickly stifled. This was the first professor missing and the school's spirit had been dampened.

Ron sat down stiffly, not bothering to retort, and immediately began tapping his foot impatiently against the floor.

"Stop being a nervous twit," commanded Ginny, who had, for the past 10 minutes, been plucking and repairing her quill.

"What is with you two?" said Draco exasperatedly. "We've been out and about plenty of times after curfew before. I mean, sure we're in the middle of a war, with spies everywhere, nowhere is safe, and You-Know-Who has a bounty on our heads, but it's very unlikely we'll be expelled at such traumatic and uncertain times, and that's what matters. That and my hair," he added as an afterthought.

Ginny and Ron stared at the blonde Slytherin.

"Your skills at reassurance and comforting astound me," commented Ginny sarcastically as Ron said, "Only you and Hermione. . ."

"You're common room would look a lot nicer in silver and green," said Draco randomly, and flicked his wand.

"Yurch," gurgled Ron as gold became silver and red became green.

"Honestly," said Ginny in disgust and waved her wand, muttering the spell that repaired the colors, adding one more element and wondered when he would notice.
A split second later Hermione and Harry entered, the Invisibility Cloak balled up in his hands. Both looked troubled. . . until they saw Draco.

Hermione clapped both hands over her mouth to stifle her giggles, not wanting to wake anyone up. Harry and Ron were leaning on each other, shaking in silent laughter, and Ginny smirked at Draco.

He looked at them suspiciously and fished a mirror out of his robes.

His hair, his beautiful hair. . . was red. Draco faced the four Gryffindors, trembling, eyes glazed over.

"If this doesn't come out I will kill you all until you are dead," he whispered.

"Oh dear," snickered Hermione. "I think he's gone into shock." She took pity on the poor boy and removed the spell.

"Now then," she said, "all jokes aside -"

"Who's joking," muttered Draco sullenly.

"- the situation is pretty serious," continued Hermione, ignoring him. "We happened to overhear Flitwick and Snape talking, with the help of our Extendable Ears, of course, and no spell has been able to detect Professor McGonagall."

"Impossible," said Draco worriedly, which was very unusual for him. "Her body's location should show up."

Harry shook his head. "It didn't," he said shortly. "They've had to search the Muggle way and they don't have a clue where she is or how she got there. The good thing is that Voldemort - stop shuddering, it's annoying - doesn't have her."

"You're sure?" asked Ginny anxiously.

"As sure as we can be, considering," he replied.

Ginny bit her lip. "I don't like this at all."

For once, Minerva woke up at the same time Sakura did.

At least I'm recovering, she thought, even though it was already 11:00 AM.

"Ohayo, Kaijuu," Touya greeted as he walked by to place a suitcase by the door. He would be returning to college campus that evening.

Sakura scowled. "Oniichan," she growled and kicked him.

"Ngghh." Touya bounced up and down, holding his shin.

Minerva observed this exchange with amusement. It was obvious that they did this regularly.

"Want some breakfast, Tabby-chan?"

Minerva spent a lazy day lounging around the Kinomoto household and wondering how she could get back to England. The wizarding population in eastern Asia was sparse and in such a small town as Tomoeda it was likely nonexistent. Not a cheerful thought.
It was beginning to get dark when the doorbell rang. Sakura was watching Tabby idly toy with a ball of string and Touya called out, "I've got it!"

A moment later the door was slammed shut so hard that Sakura's alarm clock toppled onto her bed.

Sakura rose with a beatific smile. "There's only one person Oniichan slams the door on like that," she murmured and padded softly down the stairs. Minerva followed, bemused.

The girl flung the door open. "Syaoran-kun!" she shrieked, tackling him in a hug and laughing as he swung her around.

Minerva was transfixed by the obvious and open affection the two shared. Back home one had to be careful of displaying too much affection lest someone loyal to Voldemort spied the exchange and found that person to be a weakness. Harry and Albus were especially careful with how they conducted themselves.

She shook herself out of her stupor. This was her chance to explore the park with no distractions. She slipped out the door silently and the last thing she heard as she bounded into the night was Sakura's voice.

"If you'd waited one more day you wouldn't have had to face Oniichan's wrath. He's going back to Tomoeda U tonight."

She was too far away to hear the boy's reply.

Minerva's memory and sense of direction were impeccable and she arrived at the park 20 minutes later.

Nothing, she thought disappointedly. Truthfully, she wondered what she had been expecting to find. Certainly not a wand or a portkey. She was about to leave when she heard a voice in the darkness.

"Looks like we finally found the pussy cat."

Minerva's fur stood on end when she discovered herself surrounded by three men in black robes. Death Eaters! She cursed herself for her stupidity.

"What's the matter McGonagall? Cat got your tongue?"

She attempted to bolt as they laughed unpleasantly, but a bulky wizard caught her by the scruff of the neck. She lashed out wildly with her claws and scored three long gashes on his arm.

He yelled in pain and shook her violently until she thought he planned to kill her then and there. She almost wished he would, it hurt so much.

"Enough Crabbe, don't kill her yet," said the obvious leader of the group. "Master wishes to speak with her." He turned to her and asked, "Why don't you change back? We could have us some fun."

Minerva wanted to gag.

"Put my cat down!" exclaimed a familiar voice in surprisingly good English, and Minerva could have groaned. Did Sakura have a death wish?

Startled, the leader drew his wand. When he saw Sakura, he laughed and said, "If you leave now,
we'll spare you, little Muggle."

Sakura cocked her head to one side, utterly confident. Minerva wanted to kick her. Didn't the fool girl know danger when she saw it? She racked her brain, wondering how she could save the poor girl.

The teen glanced at the wand skeptically. "You're threatening me with a stick?" She lowered her voice and leaned in, asking conspiratorially, "Are you compensating for something?"

For a moment there was absolute silence. Then all hell broke loose.

The wizard roared, "Avada Kedavra!"

The grip on Minerva slackened and she twisted free as a boy dropped down from the trees onto the two lackey wizards and slammed their heads together. Remembering the Killing Curse the leader had cast, she turned to where Sakura had stood, expecting the worst.

She needn't have worried. Apparently Sakura had tackled him. He hit the ground hard and his head cracked against a tree.

"Not local," commented Sakura with a frown, unmasking the three unconscious wizards. "I'll take that," she added pocketing Nott's wand (Minerva recognized his face immediately). "What do you think about this Syaoran-kun?"

"I think you should play American football," he said admiringly. "About everything else, I have no idea."

I think you two are very strange, thought Minerva, narrowing her eyes.

Sakura picked Minerva up, expression unreadable. "It was just so unexpected and it blinded me. I couldn't see him and I couldn't take the chance that he would try again."

Syaoran nodded. "It was extremely bright," he said, knowing she meant the spell.

"We're going to England. London."

Minerva felt her heart rate speed up. So close to home!

"W-what?" stuttered Syaoran. "But... but He lives there."

For one wild moment Minerva thought they were talking about Voldemort.

"That's exactly why we're going. A while ago Eriol told me some strange things were happening and invited me over when I had the time. Now I do. And they're English." She pointed to the three men before teleporting them home.

Minerva must have passed out because the next thing she remembered was the three of them standing on Sakura's porch. She chanced a look at the girl and saw that her eyes had become unfocused.

Almost immediately her expression changed. Her eyes flamed and she stormed into the house. "Oniichan!" she bellowed.

He looked at her warily when she entered the kitchen. "Hai?"
"You were supposed to renew the wards on the house yesterday!"

The wards protected the house and its occupants from any spying eyes, such as scrying, and from minor malignant forces, such as thieves.

Syaoran cast a sleep spell on the cat, knowing Sakura wouldn't want her to hear the conversation.

"Three foreign magic users caught her and were about to kill her!"

"I thought sorcerers weren't allowed to do evil," said Touya in confusion.

"They weren't rogue sorcerers. I don't know what they were, but they used this to do magic." Sakura extracted the wand she had confiscated from the man from her pocket.

"A wand."

"Not an ordinary one," replied Sakura. "The spells are unknown to me and I can't use it."

"Gomen," apologized Touya. "I'll renew the wards right now."

"And I'll pack for England."

"What?!"

Syaoran wisely chose this time to teleport to his house and begin his own packing.
But that doesn't stop me from admiring the silhouette of the smokestack against that fat moon as I walk through the rubble-strewn streets of the Tombs. I feel like a stranger and I think, That moon's a stranger, too. It doesn't seem real; it's more like the painted backdrop from some forties soundstage, except there's no way anybody ever gave paint and plywood this kind of depth. We're both strangers. That moon looks like it might be out of place anywhere, but I belonged here once.

-Charles de Lint, The Ivory and the Horn, 'Waifs and Strays'

A cat has nine lives. For three he plays, for three he strays, and for the last three he stays.

-American folklore

So maybe he's just an old man, down on his luck, making do. Or maybe he's got a piece of magic he wants to pass on with the music he's playing. Next time you go by, stop and give him a listen. But don't go looking for a tag to put on what you hear or, like that cat that runs off when you name her, it'll all just go away.

-Charles de Lint, The Ivory and the Horn, 'Saxophone Joe and the Woman in Black'

Well. That hadn't been so bad.

Touya had strongly protested Sakura's going to England, the understatement of the century. When he found out that Syaoran was going as well, he nearly had a coronary. Thankfully, they hadn't had to use the tranquilizers. His system had been building up a resistance to them anyway.

Instead Sakura had tied him to a chair with rope that his power couldn't untie by itself, gagged him, and transported him across the city to his dorm room. Sakura had been kind enough to send along his luggage as well. How was she supposed to know they weighed a ton? It wasn't her fault if he got a concussion.

At least she had sent him to his own dorm room. Goodness knows, Sakura had been there enough times to be able to tell. . . . Hm. Come to think of it, since when did Touya have a TV in his room? And where had he gotten the space for that extra cot and desk?

Sakura shrugged. Oh well. Touya was a big boy. He could take care of himself. He knew how to erase memories, he was just forbidden to untie, cut, or burn the ropes that bound him.

Her father hadn't been a problem. He was going out of town in a few days and had been a little worried about leaving her home alone, even though she was 18 and the most powerful sorceress in the world.

Sakura checked her suitcase one last time before climbing into bed. She would need her sleep for tomorrow. Teleporting two people, a cat, and suitcases halfway around the world was no small feat.

Minerva watched her until she was sure Sakura was asleep before examining the room inch by inch. She needed that wand. Not for her passage home, since Sakura was bringing her to London, but because it would help the Order locate Nott.
Nowhere. It wasn't in any drawers, or pockets, or tossed on the desk or floor. She turned her gaze to the suitcase and backpack against the wall. She glanced at the clock. Sakura had been asleep for 45 minutes.
Minerva decided to wait 15 minutes more before checking the bags.
11 minutes. She flicked her tail impatiently.
8 minutes. Time was crawling just to spite her.
5 minutes. Her stomach felt full of butterflies. If the girl woke up and caught her . . .
2 minutes.
Minerva waited, studying Sakura. She was breathing deeply and steadily. All signs pointed to sleep.
Minerva transformed back into a woman and stood. She stumbled a little, uncomfortable in her true form. That wasn't good. It seemed she'd been a cat for too long. Just one more day, she consoled herself. That's all.
She barely breathed, as she reached out for the backpack. Luckily the window faced the moon. One of the traits that carried over from her Animagus form was the ability to see well at night, but light helped quite a bit.
Slowly, slowly, she unzipped the bag and gently poked through the contents. Some books, food, a Chinese outfit, packets of herbs (she nearly sneezed at the smell), and several unusual pieces of jewelry. The last two she found rather unusual, but she wasn't an expert on Muggles. The wand wasn't there.
Minerva turned to the suitcase and quietly flipped it open. This would be more difficult. She would have to remember what went where.
Twenty minutes later she sat back on her heels, puzzled and disappointed. The wand wasn't there. She was positive that Sakura had brought it up here.
She shook her head, trying to keep her eyes open. A letter. She needed to get a letter to Albus.
Minerva walked soundlessly to Sakura’s desk and opened the middle drawer where she knew paper and writing materials were kept.
Quietly seating herself on the chair, she toyed with a Muggle pen, wishing for a quill. How should she start it?
Albus,
I've been in Tomoeda, Japan as a cat in a Muggle family by the name of Kinomoto. The daughter, Sakura, discovered me in a nearby park, and cared for me. Tomorrow,
Minerva looked around for a calendar.
Saturday, Sakura and her friend, Syaoran, are journeying to England. Would you do me the favor of sending someone to meet me at the pub? I'd rather not use Floo powder, and I'm sure you recall that I do not have my wand.
-Minerva
She wondered if she should add in the part about the Death Eaters discovering her, and decided to wait until she returned to Hogwarts and saw Albus. No use worrying him before she could make it clear that she was fine. He could be rather overprotective at times.
Minerva bit her lip and examined the writing. It was the only code she had memorized that hadn't been broken. She hoped she hadn't been too detailed. Codes weren't foolproof, and she hadn't brought the seal with her that would prevent any but a member of the Order from reading it.
Satisfied with her work, she rummaged through the drawer and came up with an envelope. This she addressed to Dumbledore. Now came the hard part.
Minerva took a deep breath and concentrated as hard as she could, trying to feel the magic that lay inside her. When she thought she had grasped it, she let it flow out from her fingers and surround the letter. A moment later the envelope was gone.
Oh dear, she thought, darkness hovering at the edges of her vision. She hadn't fully recovered from the Cruciatus Curse, not to mention she was tired and had sent a letter halfway around the world without a wand.
Cat, she thought desperately and felt herself shrink as she lost consciousness.
Syaoran looked at her in amusement. "We haven't even gotten there yet."
"Yes, but when we have to leave at 7:00 in the morning to get to England at a decent time. . ."
Sakura scowled.
"At least Tabby-chan is still asleep," Syaoran pointed out. "You don't want her to see you do the teleport, do you?"
"I'll still have to account for her lack of memory of the airplane ride."
"Sakura. . ."
"Well, what else can I do to keep her ignorant? I know we don't encourage tampering with memories, but sometimes it's safer that way," Sakura said crossly. "Let's just get going." She brightened. "I'm trying something new with this teleport."
"What?" asked Syaoran warily.
"Just follow me," said Sakura with a grin, wheeling her suitcase to the front door.
"We're not going to walk somewhere with all of this stuff, are we?" said Syaoran skeptically.
"Not exactly."
Sakura opened the door and stepped through. Syaoran followed more slowly.
He whistled, impressed despite himself. The two of them stood in Eriol's living room, furnished with plush, red sofas facing the fireplace. Looking up, you could see a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. "A perfect transport. None of the usually disorientation. And it must have taken some energy to translocate and connect two different doors."
"I live to please," said Sakura with a mocking bow.
"Hello Sakura. My cute little descendant. Welcome to my humble abode," greeted Eriol, stepping into the room wearing a robe.
"Hi Eriol," said Sakura cheerfully.
"Hiiragizawa," growled Syaoran, his knuckles white as he clenched the handle of his suitcase in a death grip.
"Tomoyo-chan will be coming by plane in a few days. She has a choir performance, and her mother wanted to spend some time with her now that she's out of school," Sakura told him, suppressing a yawn. "And Kero-chan is coming with her."
"I'll show you to your rooms," said Eriol. "This way, please."
Sakura followed in a daze, stroking Tabby-chan repeatedly.
Eriol frowned and turned to look at her. "You're modifying her memories?"
Sakura was silent for a moment, tying up the last strands of the spell. "She needs to at least vaguely remember a plane ride, or she'll be suspicious. She's strange. Do you see the silver tangles that surround her?"
Eriol gently took Tabby from Sakura's arms and examined her without missing a step. To Syaoran's disappointment, he neither tripped nor bumped into anything.
"Yes," Eriol said. "Yes. It fits."
"Fits?" asked Syaoran sharply as Eriol halted and opened a door. "Fits what?"
"I'll explain in the morning. Good night."
Syaoran found himself and his baggage in the room, the door shut behind him, and two sets of footsteps fading away. He growled and clenched his hand into a fist before sighing and changing into his pajamas. At least he'd always adjusted well to time differences.
Sakura stopped in front of the door next to Syaoran's. "Was that really necessary?"
"What?" asked Eriol blandly.
Sakura sighed. "Never mind."
"If you wake up in the middle of the night, the kitchen is down the stairs and to the right. Hey. That rhymes."
Sakura snorted. "Oyasumi nasai, Eriol-san."
"Oyasumi nasai."
Sakura sighed and laid Tabby down in the cat bed before flopping down on her own bed and falling asleep instantly.
Three hours later (1:00 AM England time) Sakura opened her eyes and spent the next half hour staring at the ceiling, trying to get back to sleep, but it was no use. She could fall asleep anywhere
when she was tired, but she had the hardest time adjusting to different time zones. Syaoran, on the other hand, had no trouble.
With a sigh she heaved herself off the bed and headed off to the kitchen. She anticipated many sleepless nights to come. Maybe hot chocolate would make her sleepy enough to fall asleep in a few hours.
She groaned and turned on the stove.
Syaoran awoke and glanced at his clock. 7:00. He stretched and threw on some clothes before heading downstairs to the kitchen, feeling wide awake and somewhat energetic. He stopped upon entering the kitchen and grinned. Sakura was asleep at the table, an empty mug held loosely in her right hand.
He quietly stalked over to her, careful not to wake her up. Then he slammed his hand down on the table.
BANG!
Sakura yelped and leapt to her feet. The mug skidded across the table and stopped a few inches from the edge.
"SYAORAN!!"
Eriol walked into the kitchen looking disheveled and thoroughly disgruntled. "Normal people are trying to sleep at this hour," he told them sulkily as Sakura chased Syaoran around the room. They stopped.
"You're not normal," Syaoran observed dryly.
"Oh," said Sakura worriedly. "Did we wake Mizuki-sensei?"
"She's in the Philippines right now," said Eriol, gritting his teeth.
"Ohayo, Sakura-chan!" exclaimed Nakuru, rushing past Eriol in her haste to glomp the girl.
Eriol threw his hands in the air. "Fine! I realize that no one cares about me or my lack of beauty sleep. And you're ignoring me."
"That's right," agreed Syaoran, trying to pry Nakuru's arms from around Sakura's neck.
Minerva woke with the vague impression that she was still in the cage. It took a moment to confirm that that was not the case. She yawned and stretched, feeling better than she had in a long time. Then she realized that she was in an unfamiliar room.
Now where am I? she wondered crossly, and made her way over to the window.
Her heart thudded in her chest. The view was dreary and gray, rain pounded against the window, but she didn't care. Everything was so familiar. She was nearly home! The Leaky Cauldron was only a few blocks away!
She stepped back and reflected on the flight here. She must have been exhausted to have slept through the whole flight. The only clear memory she had was being in the airport in Japan. She remembered the feet passing by, and the bumping ride in the animal cage to their gate. Many voices talked rapidly in Japanese, but the puzzling thing was that she couldn't recall a word of what anyone had said.
All Minerva had to do was get out of this house. Mansion, rather, but that shouldn't be too hard. She padded softly down the stairs and decided to head to the left. The door had to be around here somewhere.
And there it was. A large wooden door carved with all manner of designs.
"There you are," someone said softly and Minerva spun around. Sakura was standing behind her, holding a small black stuffed animal and wearing a sad smile. "You're leaving now?"
She didn't seem to expect an answer and Minerva didn't move.
"I'll miss you. Oh!" Sakura set the toy on her shoulder and rummaged through her pockets. "Here it is!"
She held a silver necklace with a small crystal cherry blossom charm. "Don't forget us," Sakura said, wrapping the necklace twice around Minerva's neck before opening the door.
Minerva meowed softly and then sprinted out onto the street, heading toward the Leaky Cauldron. It was wet and cars splashed walls of water. There weren't many people that she had to avoid on the sidewalks, which was a small blessing. The driving rain had sent them all scurrying indoors. It wasn't long before she was shivering with cold and soaked to the bone. Almost there, she told
herself encouragingly. Just a little more.

A wizard was entering the pub as she turned the corner and she barely made it inside behind him. The room was smoky and loud. People huddled in groups, eyes darting about suspiciously. "Did you hear about the Johannesons? Cut to pieces in front of . . ."

"I always knew he'd go bad. The apple doesn't fall far . . ."

". . . even went after the children. I can't imagine . . ."

Minerva ignored the chatter and shook herself before examining the area around the door, keeping close to the shadows. Whoever was supposed to meet her would most definitely be in a room, and Order members left signs near the entrance of buildings that only other members could recognize. And there it was. A small red feather caught in a crack in the wall. It had an 'OP' stamped on it and the number 18 beneath.

Minerva clawed the feather to tiny pieces before slinking out a side door and into a hallway of doors.

She stopped in front of #18 and scratched the door. Ordinarily she would have transformed back into her normal self, but if she did the necklace Sakura had given her would choke her.

The door opened and Minerva froze. Albus?

"Come in," the Headmaster murmured quietly and closed the door behind him.

"Minerva?" he asked. "Why don't you change back?"

She fixed him with a glare and pawed at the chain around her neck.

"Ah," he said with a small grin and unclasped the necklace.

Minerva immediately became herself again. "What are doing here?" she asked. "I thought you'd send someone, not come yourself."

He embraced her, heedless of her wet clothes, and she stiffened before allowing herself to relax.

"I came to see if you were alright. And I must say you had me worried for a moment, Minerva. I was afraid you'd gone feral."

Sakura glanced at Spinel Sun. "So?"

He nodded, perched comfortably on her shoulder as she turned and headed back to the living room, where Syaoran, Eriol, and Nakuru were waiting for them.

"I agree. The spell looks self-induced. That's about all I could discern from the tangle."

"There was some structure to the spell," Sakura said. "Just nothing we're used to."

"Exactly," said Eriol as she entered the room, and motioned for her to take a seat.

"What do you know that we don't?" asked Syaoran in an attempt at being civil that obviously pained him.

"A great deal," Eriol replied with a smirk.

"He meant pertaining to this mystery," Sakura cut in before Syaoran could speak.

"Well, in the past two weeks I've been investigating and researching strange occurrences and believe I have some of the answers," said Eriol. "It began when I arrived at the scene of a mass killing. One traumatized woman kept shouting that magic had killed them. Masked men in black robes and masks had appeared out of thin air and pointed wands at random people, killing them instantly. My first thought was that a rogue sorcerer was on the loose, so I retreated across the street and examined the building level by level, but I could find no trace of sorcery. What I did find were large traces of silver threads, obviously spells. What troubled me was that I didn't recognize it, and recalled nothing from Clow's memories. I returned and questioned the woman, only to discover that she remembered nothing of what she'd seen or been screaming. She looked at me as if I were crazy - "

"You are," muttered Syaoran. Sakura elbowed him sharply.

" - and told me that she had no idea what I was talking about. I noticed that her eyes had a curiously blank look and examined her with the Sight. There were traces of the same silver threads about her, but this time it didn't seem malignant. I left it at that and returned home."

"After that I activated the Sight whenever I went outside. For a while I saw nothing of the silver, and was about to give it up when I walked south to visit a small book store. I rarely head in that direction, so it was no wonder I hadn't noticed before. There was a small dingy pub called the Leaky Cauldron that nearly blinded me with the spells that had been placed over it.
"I decided to make myself invisible and slip inside. It was full of people in cloaks, huddled close together in groups. They were afraid, suspicious of everyone they didn't know well. Not one of them was there alone. One group stood, and I moved to the side of the door so they wouldn't walk into me, but instead they headed toward the back. I followed them. They stopped in front of a brick wall and one of them took out a wand and tapped a brick. The wall disappeared and I looked upon a cobblestone walkway lined with shops. A sign said, 'Diagon Alley.'

"At that moment the wall began closing and I retreated, not wanting to become trapped in a world I knew nothing about.

"Since then Spinel Sun and I have been scouring the bookshelves in the library and after much research and investigation I have discovered some of your answers."

Sakura snapped her fingers and held out her hand, palm up. The wand she'd taken off of the Englishman appeared.

"Was the wand designed like this?" she asked, holding it out to Eriol.

Eriol took it and examined it. "Yes. The wood was different, but the design is similar. Their wands are much cruder than ours, but I suppose they get the job done, or they'd have improved them."

"So who are these people?" asked Syaoran impatiently. "What are they?"

Eriol fixed his piercing gaze on Syaoran, eyes glittering. "Witches and wizards. There's a whole society of them living in secret, right here in England, and, I would guess, all over the world. They're in the middle of a war against a rogue wizard and his army. I don't know his true name, but they refer to him as You-Know-Who." He snorted. "As if someone as weak as a wizard could see you or know who spoke his name."

"So they're not very powerful?" asked Sakura with interest, leaning forward.

"I would guess that the most powerful among them would only rank a low-level sorcerer," replied Eriol. "I wanted to ask, have you had any dreams about this?"

Sakura frowned. "Perhaps. I don't really remember any of my dreams. There is one way to find out. Do you have a blank CD and a boombox?"

"I'll get it!" said Nakuru, leaping to her feet and skipping out the door. She returned a few minutes later with the requested items.

"Arigatou," said Sakura with a small smile. She picked up the CD and closed her eyes, gathering energy. The disk hovered above her hand and began to spin, emitting a golden light. Streaks of colored lightning seemed to flash across it. The light disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"Done," said Sakura with a satisfied smile. "Now we play it."

She handed it to Nakuru who popped it in the boombox.

Eriol realized that she'd transferred her dreams onto the disk and frowned, muttering, "New-fangled technology these days. What's wrong with the old spells, I ask you?"

Syaoran smirked. "You're just annoyed that you didn't think of it. Admit it. You're getting old."

Clow's half reincarnation glared at him, but his attention immediately turned to the machine when the CD began playing.

At first it was just static, but then voices became clear, many voices, talking about people and events that none of the beings in the room knew of.

"Did you hear about Stratford School of Magically Gifted? Burned to the ground and . . ."

"... told yeh 'e was a good fer nuthin' . . ."

"... You-Know-Who is immortal some say . . ."

"... poor Potter boy 'as a lot on 'is shoulders . . ."

"... lucky Dumbledore is at Hogwarts . . ."

"... Harry Potter'll be safe at Hogwarts . . ."

"... reckon Master will allow us into his inner circle . . ."

"... take over Hogsmeade. From there we'll launch our attack on Hogwarts . . ."

"... wants revenge on Harry Potter . . ."

"... kill that Muggle-loving fool . . ."

"... only safe place left, Hogwarts is . . ."
"... yeh can't trust them Slytherins ..."
"... Dumbledore and Potter, those two will defeat him, mark my words ...
"... kill them! Eliminate all Muggles and any who would defend them ...
"... traitor among us ...
"... join Dumbledore ...
"... Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who is afraid of ...
"... most powerful wizard in centuries, you'll be safe ...
"... protect us ...
"... safe ...
"... war ...
"... losing ...
"... Dark Lord ...
"... Help me," a little girl whimpered.
Screams, and shouts, and above it all a high, cold, cruel laugh that made their skin crawl.
The words were once more lost in static, but none of them dared move, none dared speak. That
world was in turmoil, and what affected one world would eventually affect them all.
Someone gasped. It sounded like a boy, perhaps their own age.
"Voldemort!"
The CD stopped. Silence descended.
Sakura broke the silence. "I'm going to help them."
"We all are," said Eriol, "but to do that we need to learn more about them, their history, their
magic, the key people and events in this war. We can't charge in there ignorant."
"How are we going to do this?" asked Syaoran. "We can't just charge in there, tell them we're
sorcerers and more than three times as powerful as they are and expect them to trust us."
"Of course not. That's why we're going to disguise ourselves as one of them. We'll split up and
infiltrate three major places. One of us will definitely take this Hogwarts place and discover who
this Dumbledore and Potter are. Perhaps they have a newspaper or government building. Spying
avoids going through all the red tape," said Eriol matter-of-factly.
"Red tape?" asked Sakura, her accent more pronounced when repeating a word she didn't know.
"It means a mess of paperwork," explained Eriol.
"Right."
"Did you put a tracking spell on your cat?"
"Of course," said Sakura indignantly. "I added it to the protection spell on the sakura blossom
pendant."
"I think it's time to see what our feline friend is up to," said Eriol and Sakura immediately
activated the tracker.
Syaoran frowned at the map that appeared. "Isn't that just a couple blocks away from here?" he
asked.
"As I suspected. She's at the Leaky Cauldron," said Eriol.
"Do you want me to scry this?" asked Sakura.
"Yes, please."
The map wavered and was replaced with the image of a hotel room. A man and woman stood
near the door. The man was tall and old. He wore half-moon glasses and purple robes. His eyes
were bright blue and he had a long silver beard and silver hair cascaded down his back.
The woman was rather old as well and dressed in torn, wet green robes. She wore square glasses
and her ebony hair was streaked with silver and pulled back into a loose bun. Despite her
somewhat shabby appearance she carried herself with an elegant grace. And her eyes . . .
"Tabby-chan!" Sakura exclaimed. "She's that woman!"
"Of course," said Spinel thoughtfully. "She changed herself into a cat. That was the self-induced
spell we noticed."
"Shh," hissed Syaoran. "I can't hear what they're saying."
"What happened? How did you disappear?" asked Albus, stepping back to examine her. "You're
not hurt, are you?"
"Honestly, sometimes you're worse than my mother was," said Minerva, shaking her head. "Do you mind if I take a shower before I say anything? I'm freezing."
"Of course. I took the liberty of bringing you a clean set of robes," replied Dumbledore.
"Thank you," said Minerva, giving him one of her rare smiles.
"I also brought your wand. Why in the world didn't you keep it?"
Her smile quickly faded. "You're the only one Voldemort is afraid of. You needed it more than I did."

He raised an eyebrow. "As I recall, you were his focus. At the moment you were the bigger threat."
"Which was why you were able to surprise him. I think," she added with a frown, gathering up the clean robes.

He grasped her by the shoulders. "You don't know, because you were wandless under the Cruciatus Curse."
"Albus, I'm fine," she told him, shrugging him off and heading toward the bathroom, missing the hurt look in his eyes when she turned away. "I was well cared for, and I'm healed now."
"Wait."

Minerva stopped and he parted the torn robes on her right side enough to examine the scar she had received from the Cutting Curse.
"All right," he said, straightening. "I'll take your word that you're healed."
"Thank you."

Moments later the shower was running. Minerva stepped beneath the hot running water, sighing as it beat a tattoo on her back. The steam relaxed her muscles, and for the first time in a long time she felt clean.

"Interesting," murmured Eriol.

Minerva was taking a shower at the moment and Albus Dumbledore sat at the desk, full of nervous energy. He hid it well, but Eriol could pick it out easily.

He looked up to see Sakura wearing a wide, silly grin. "What?" he asked.

Sakura shook her head. "You're recording this, right?"

"Yeeessss," Eriol answered slowly.

"Can I send it to Tomoyo when we're done?" she asked.

"Sure," he agreed. "Why?"

"To confirm my suspicions."

"Which are?"

"Private. Stop trying to read my thoughts."

"Right," he said, disgruntled, and stood. "Tell me when the shower goes off."

Minerva stepped out of the bathroom with her hair dry and in its usual bun, her old robes bundled under her arm.

Seeing Albus sitting at the desk, she perched on the edge of the bed. "Where do you want me to start?" she asked, shifting uncomfortably.

"How about when you disappeared? How did you Disapparate?"

Minerva frowned. "You know that Animagi have more talent for wandless magic than anyone else, most likely because the very act of changing form is a wandless act? When I was under the Cruciatus it was . . . my most fervent wish was to get away. I think I accidentally performed a wandless spell, using not only my own energy, but somehow channeling the energy of the curse to get me all the way to Tomoeda, Japan."

"A good theory," Albus agreed.

"I don't remember anything before waking up in a girl's room." She hugged herself, eyes unfocused as she remembered. "Everything hurt and I tired easily. At first I didn't realize I was in another country, even though everyone spoke Japanese. It's lucky that I ended up in Japan. Japanese is the only foreign language I know."

"Extremely lucky," said Albus, reaching out to pat her arm.

"I think I wrote in my letter that the Kinomoto family took me in." Minerva frowned, trying to shake off the feeling that she was being watched. "The girl who cared for me was named Sakura.
She had an older brother named Touya, and I only met two of her friends, Tomoyo and Syaoran.

"Yesterday night - was it only yesterday? - I managed to slip out the door and made my way to the park where they mentioned I had been found. I don't know what I was hoping to find, but there was nothing. Then three Death Eaters, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle, appeared and grabbed me. I wonder why they hadn't appeared before?"

Albus' expression had become worried. "Well, it stands to reason that if we couldn't locate you, Voldemort couldn't either. But did he find a new spell, or did some element change?"

Minerva looked surprised. "You tried to find me?"

"Of course! How could you think that we didn't?"

She avoided his gaze and studied the blankets, saying rather sheepishly, "I just assumed that you were busy. I found a way back myself."

"Minerva," he said softly. "I'd never abandon you. Or anyone if I could help it."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure Lockhart is the exception."

He chuckled. "Let's not get sidetracked at the moment. Do you have any idea why you were untraceable?"

Minerva shook her head. "When they caught me, I wasn't sure what to do. Then Sakura arrived and I was terrified for her. She foolishly thrust herself into a dangerous situation."

"You sound like you're talking about one of your students. It turned out all right?"

"Oh yes," she replied wryly. "Her friend Syaoran leaped out of a tree and knocked Crabbe and Goyle unconscious. Sakura took out Nott by dodging the Killing Curse and tackling him, knocking his head against a tree." Minerva frowned. "Then Sakura took Nott's wand. She brought it home and I'm sure she left it in her room, but I couldn't find it. I even checked her drawers and no luck."

"It shouldn't be too much of a problem that she has the wand," Dumbledore thought out loud. "As a Muggle she won't be able to use it. I'm more concerned that Voldemort will send someone for revenge."

"Should we have a wizard watch her and her family?" suggested Minerva.

("No!" exclaimed Sakura as she watched the scene. "Eriol, fix it! Sorcery will be twice as hard to work with us being watched by them!"

"What am I, your resident Mr. Fix-It?" grumbled Eriol, touching the scene. It briefly glowed blue to their eyes.)

"No." Dumbledore shook his head. "That would most likely draw unwanted attention to them. And the Dark Lord is drawing his followers close to him. We need all the help we can get."

"There was something strange that Sakura said when she returned home after the fight. She was livid and yelled at her brother." Minerva racked her memory, trying to repeat it word for word. "She told him, 'You were supposed to renew the wards on the house yesterday,' and he apologized. That's when she announced that she was going to England. What does it mean, Albus? I'm sure she wasn't a witch."

"Muggles have religion called wicca. It uses what some might consider magic, but it has very little similarity to ours. Or it could be nothing," said Albus easily.

"Do you think a ward made by 'wiccans' would block the locator spells?"

"Perhaps. It's something we should look into when we have more time and less to worry about," suggested Albus.

Minerva nodded in agreement. "There's not much left for me to tell. I slept most of the way to England and Sakura let me out this morning, giving me this before I left." She fingered the necklace.

"Albus, what do you know about Asian witches and wizards?" she asked suddenly.

"Aside from the native culture, they are similar to you or me. The only difference is the population. For some reason, Asia has a smaller population of wizards, especially in the east in places such as Japan, Vietnam, China, and so on. There is one thing that we don't understand. You are familiar with the energy absorbing of the earth?"

"Yes. The earth inadvertently soaks up tiny bits of magic, reflecting the population of magic beings and users," recited Minerva.
"In eastern Asia, the earth should reflect a much lower amount of magic than any other place. Instead it is about equal to the more powerful places, such as England, Ireland, Alaska, Hawaii, and Australia. Though eastern Asia has a larger population of magical beings than most areas, it should not account for such a large leap in magic energy. Our researchers believed that they were close to the answer when Voldemort returned. Now that mystery will have to wait. Are you ready to return to Hogwarts?"
"I'm assuming you have a new wand?"
Albus grinned. "I paid a visit to Ollivander the day after you disappeared. Would you like to Apparate or would you rather go by Floo?"
"Don't even joke," she told him sourly. "I have no wish to be in the hands of Voldemort so soon."
"As you wish, my dear," he said gallantly.
They vanished.
"You're getting good," Sakura said to Syaoran.
"Well, I knew that they would be too suspicious for our liking if I didn't do something."
"Congratulations, Descendant," said Eriol gaily. "But you still have a long way to go if you want to match my subtlety when messing with minds."
"You don't even need magic to do that," said Sakura dryly. "And I suppose our frowning down upon those who mess with memories doesn't make you feel guilty?"
"Nope," said Eriol brightly. "And it's all for a good cause."
"It always is with you," said Syaoran, glaring.
"Shouldn't we see where they've gone?" interrupted Spinel.
"Of course," said Sakura and clapped her hands once. The empty room changed and became a map of the British Isles. A red dot blinked in northern Scotland.
"Do you know this place asked Sakura, enlarging Scotland and erasing the surrounding countries. Eriol shook his head. "I rarely journey to Scotland, and never so far north."
"What good are you?" asked Syaoran as Sakura enlarged the image, focusing on the blinking dot. She could have just brought up an image of the area or room Minerva appeared in, but this way one could get an idea of the surroundings. Besides, it was easier to zoom in than it was to zoom out.
Sakura finally got the two adults on the image and shushed the two boys. They were walking in a forest toward a large, impressive castle.
"If they wanted to get to the castle, why didn't they just teleport there?" asked Syaoran sourly.
"The logical assumption would be that something prevented them from doing just that. Cute descendant," Eriol added as an afterthought.
"Why you," growled Syaoran.
"Stop it. Both of you. Eriol, what is Hogwarts? Is it the castle? Who lives there?"
"I haven't had the chance to find out," Eriol replied delicately. My assumption is that Hogwarts is the castle. I think I heard that Albus Dumbledore is the Headmaster, so I'm guessing that it's a school of some sort."
"How are we supposed to infiltrate that?!" exclaimed Sakura. "It's huge and I can almost see the power coating it. Not so powerful as us, but not something to be trifled with."
"Actually, only one of us is going to infiltrate that," Eriol replied brightly. She stared at him. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"
"Not necessarily," said Eriol in an unconcerned tone.
"Serpentium," gasped Hermione. She, Harry, Ginny, and Ron stood in front of the blank wall, panting after the long run from the Charms classroom.
An opening appeared and the four Gryffindors sped through the Slytherin common room. The Slytherins watched this without batting an eye. After a little over a year of such activity, they no longer shot spells at whichever Gryffindor that raced past. It wasn't like they'd been able to hit them anyway. Though Slytherins disliked Gryffindors as a rule, less than a quarter of them truly hated them, and those that did were eager to become Death Eaters. They didn't dare let this desire become commonly known. It was always easier to work anonymously and in secret.
"Draco!" exclaimed Ginny as they entered his dorm room and slammed the door shut behind
The blond Slytherin jumped. "Good God! Don't any of you know how to knock? I could have been changing, you know!"

Ron looked sick. "Oh, that was a very very bad mental picture."
"It's the middle of the day," Harry pointed out dryly.
"So? It's also a Sunday." He sighed and waved a hand imperiously. "Get on with what you were about to say."
"Have we taught you nothing?" asked Hermione. "What's the magic word?"
"Alohomora, Incendio, Expelliarmus. Take your pick."
"Malfoy," Hermione said warningly.
"Granger," he drawled sarcastically.
"Well, if that's the way you're going to be, I guess we won't tell you," said Ginny with a smirk and turned to leave. It was incredibly amusing to see his conflicting emotions, especially since he rarely showed any.
"Fine," he growled.
They waited expectantly.
"Please," he mumbled under his breath.
"What was that?" asked Harry, trying to hide a grin. "I couldn't hear you."
Draco looked at him murderously. "Please," he mumbled furiously.
"What?" asked Hermione.
"Will you please. Freakin'. Tell me!" he bellowed.
"Since you asked so politely," Ginny said sweetly, "Harry overheard Sprout and Flitwick saying that Dumbledore got a letter from McGonagall. He's going to get her today!"
Draco looked impressed, even as he tried to hide the relief that their Transfigurations Professor was safe. "You're getting good at this eavesdropping thing, Potter."
"Well, I've had seven years of practice," Harry stated matter-of-factly.
"Hurry up," said Hermione, almost bouncing in her impatience. "We wanted to greet her when she arrives."
"At least let me put on my cloak," said Draco.
"Let's just go," said Ginny.
"Sometimes I wish we didn't have those anti-Apparition wards," sighed Minerva as the two of them walked across the grounds of Hogwarts.
"But it's a beautiful day for a walk," protested Dumbledore. "The sun is out and - "
"It's cold," finished Minerva. "Sometimes I miss my fur."
Albus threw back his head and laughed as they entered the main doors. "My dear, that is probably one of the strangest things I've ever heard."
She didn't have a chance to reply when something hit her at chest level causing her to step back. Albus was immediately at her side to keep her from falling over.
"Miss Granger?" she asked, astonished, and awkwardly put her arms around the girl. She strongly suspected that Hermione was crying.
Then she looked up and noticed three other students. Malfoy was scowling at the floor, hands jammed in his pockets, and Potter and the two youngest Weasleys were fidgeting uncomfortably.
"What on earth..." she asked, at a loss for words.
"W-we're glad you're all right," Ginny Weasley said softly.
"How did you know I would be coming back today?" Professor McGonagall asked.
Harry turned red under her gaze and coughed uncomfortably.
"We just happened to be around," said Ron guiltily. "We weren't sneaking around. Listening. At doors."
Harry groaned and Draco slapped a hand to his forehead. "Smooth, Weasley," he sneered half-heartedly.
"And you say you're related to Fred and George?" hissed Ginny. "Honestly."
Dumbledore chuckled and the three jumped. Hermione finally let go her death grip on the Transfigurations professor and stepped back, embarrassed.
"I'm sure you had the best of intentions," he said kindly. "Why don't you go off to your Common Rooms and inform everyone of Professor McGonagall's arrival while I escort her to the Hospital Wing."

As the four scurried away their professors' voices followed them, quickly growing faint.
"Albus!" she exclaimed. "I am perfectly fine."
He looked at her gravely. "It is better to be safe than sorry."
Sakura waved a hand and cut the connection.
"I think that might be a boarding school," said Eriol.
"What's a Muggle?" asked Sakura.
"I don't know," said Eriol.
"What?" said Syaoran sarcastically. "You don't have a book of wizard lingo?"
Eriol chuckled. "Not at the moment, cute descendant, but I plan on remedying that soon."
"How so?" asked Sakura curiously.
"We," Eriol announced grandly, "are going to Diagon Alley."
"Right now?" asked Sakura nervously, following him into the kitchen.
"Of course," said Eriol, going to a closet and rummaging around inside. "Ah ha." He brought out his midnight blue robes. "You might stand out a bit in that clothing, but I think it's better than wearing your Asian robes."
"Why would we stand out?" asked Syaoran, looking down at his clothes.
"I thought you were more perceptive than that, Descendant. Didn't you notice that they were all wearing robes?"
"I just thought it was a uniform, or something," Syaoran said with a scowl.
"Right," said Eriol, tossing his robes on over his clothes. He grabbed his keys and checked to make sure he had the Key to his staff with him. "Let's go. Coming Spinel?"
"I think I would prefer to stay," began Spinel when Nakuru called out, "Oh Suppi-chan! Where are you?!"
"On second thought, I would be happy to accompany you," he said hastily, and dove into Sakura's backpack.

Eriol quickly wove a simple illusion spell to keep others from noticing his unusual dress.
Sakura wrinkled her nose as they headed out. The air smelled of burning rubber and car exhaust; the streets were crowded and noisy, a sharp contrast to her small, quiet town. It was somewhat similar to Tokyo, and Osaka.
Sakura yelped and stumbled back as a car ran a red light, right before she was about to cross the street.
"Kami-sama," she gasped, more than ready to get into some stronger terms.
"Let's go," said Eriol impatiently, pulling both her and Syaoran along behind him.
"What's the hurry?" Syaoran grumbled, jerking his hand from Eriol's grasp. Sakura noticed that this was done after they had crossed the street.
"You've got to get across when the streets are clear, or you'll end up as roadkill. Tomoeda is positively heaven compared to this mess."
Neither of them argued that point.
"Here we are," Eriol announced, several minutes later. The three of them stood before a small, dingy pub.
Syaoran noticed that everyone around him - save for his companions - was ignorant of the buildings existence.
"This is it?" asked Sakura dubiously. "It's so... dirty."
"Didn't I tell you that?"
"I don't remember," she answered truthfully.
"Let's just get inside before we attract attention," said Syaoran and opened the door.
Eriol entered between Sakura and Syaoran, using them as a sort of shield as he doffed his illusion. "This way," he murmured and made his way to a back room. Once the door closed behind them they sighed in relief, glad that they hadn't been challenged or noticed.
"Now what?" asked Syaoran.
"I'm thinking. Help me find a brick that looks like it's been tapped on quite a few times. It should be in this area." He waved at the part of the wall above the garbage cans.
Syaoran was used to these sorts of exercises and soon found one that looked lighter than all the rest.
"Sakura, do you still have that wand?" Eriol whispered.
She silently took it out and handed it to him.
"I hope this works," Eriol muttered as he tapped the brick. He figured it was the wand itself that was the key to getting to Diagon Alley, not actively using it, since the only flash of magic he'd seen when in the presence of the other wizards had been the door opening. There was a chance that he was wrong.
The bricks pulled back to form an archway.
"Yes," whispered Sakura with a grin. Her look quickly melted into awe. "It's like a blend of old and modern. They can't coexist comfortably with normal people."
"That," Eriol murmured back as they started walking down the cobbled street, "is what I think is one of the main differences between them and us. Their type of magic helps them even as it hinders their technological progress. You'll notice a distinct lack of technology and machines. It's all done by magic."
"Don't you notice?" interrupted Syaoran.
"Notice what?" asked Sakura, somewhat distracted by the smell coming from the apothecary.
"Look at them. No one dares go out alone. They're all huddled up together in groups, and even then they eye each other suspiciously. They don't know who to trust, don't dare let down their guard. They're terrified."
Sakura looked around and wondered how she had missed it. No one was truly relaxed. They all had their guard up.
"At least we won't look so suspicious since there are three of us," Sakura pointed out in a murmur.
"Let's go in there." Eriol pointed at Madam Malkin's Robes. "We need to blend in."
"Ah, Eriol," Sakura said uncomfortably. "I didn't think to get any English money."
"Not to worry," said Eriol. "I have more than enough for the three of us."
"If you're sure," Sakura replied as they stepped inside.
"I'm sure," Eriol replied and they began browsing through the racks of robes.
"Black seems to be the most common," Syaoran murmured.
"Right." Sakura nodded. "Oh, excuse me," she said as she bumped into a wizard.
"Pardon me," he said at the same time and moved on.
"Tomoyo's going to be livid when she finds out we bought robes. We're going to have to placate her by allowing her to make us a wardrobe of robes," Sakura said with a quiet giggle as she examined a black robe with gold embroidery on the cuffs.
"Wonderful," grumbled Syaoran as he grabbed a robe so black it seemed to suck in light.
Eriol eyed his selection. "That's sure to get them to trust you," he said dryly. "Black as the Dark Lord's heart." He made sure that no one could overhear him when he said this.
"Here they are," Sakura said, finding a rack of ordinary black robes. "Leftovers from Hogwarts' students. Half off."
They each took their sizes and headed for the counter where a witch sat. The wizard Sakura had bumped into was in front of them with a red robe.
"That'll be two Galleons, five Sickles," the witch said tonelessly.
The three behind him immediately tensed.
That's not English money, is it?, Sakura asked telepathically.
Wizard money, Eriol said viciously. Of course! Syaoran, can you see what they look like enough to transform some change?
Syaoran slunk to the side, pretending to examine an advertisement flashing in the air above the counter.
Which one was two? he asked.
Galleons. Hurry! Eriol sent.
Got it, he sent back and returned to stand next to them. He concentrated on changing the handful
of change into Galleons and Sickles, half of each. He hoped the witch didn't look too closely at them. He was sure he hadn't gotten all the details right. "Thank you. Please come again," the witch said and it was their turn. "Five Galleons, three Sickles, seven Knuts."
Eriol made a gamble and gave her five of the gold coins and four of the silver ones. He was rewarded with several copper coins and they left quickly. "That was close," Sakura gasped, a hand over her racing heart. "Much too close," Eriol agreed, and handed Syaoran the Knuts. "Are the pictures the same?" he asked. "Yes. Hand me those other ones I transformed and I'll fix them," said Syaoran.
They walked along the cobble stones leisurely, looking in windows and occasionally entering interesting stores. They didn't buy anything until they got to Flourish & Blotts. Eriol's eyes lit up. "Two books each," he cautioned. "Find good ones, preferably history or spells, and anything informative."
They spent an hour browsing before they had what they wanted. Eriol was carrying The Founding of the Wizarding World and Dark Lords: The Rise and Fall. Syaoran carried a rather large tome that read Ancient Spells and Their Origins. On top of it was a rather thin book that they overlooked at first. It was Major Wizarding Centers and How to Get There for Dummies.
It had taken Sakura a while longer because, while she could read English at a decent pace, she was much faster at Japanese. She had finally managed to collect a small pile of books and brought them over to Eriol and Syaoran to get their opinions on which to keep. She ended up with Modern Magical Events and Their Causes and Consequences and The Big Book of Spells. They weren't exaggerating when they said big, either. It was larger than the tome Syaoran had discovered, though it was not nearly as old. Foreign Wizarding Communities caught her eye, but she reluctantly moved by.
Eriol surveyed the pile and figured, if the system was anything like theirs, it would cost a small fortune. "Syaoran," he hissed as they slowly made their way to the front. "Make more of those gold coins. This is going to be costly."
"Do you have anymore change?" he asked. "I left mine at your mansion."
Eriol wordlessly handed him a handful of change and Syaoran passed his books to him so he could concentrate. It was lucky he did. The 37 Galleons and eight Sickles nearly cleaned them out. "Did you find out what 'Muggle' means?" Sakura asked suddenly as they lingered in front of a broom store.
Eriol groaned. "I forgot." He sighed. "I'll try to remember on the way back."
"Let's try this way," Sakura suggested, gesturing at a small path between the second-hand broom store and a cafe.
"Sure," said Eriol and Syaoran shrugged. They were in no hurry. They followed it, gazing at the floating candles and illusion garden that covered the sides of the buildings.
Sakura noticed the library first. She clapped her hands. "What luck!"
They immediately trooped inside and headed for the reference section. It only took a moment for them to find the dictionary and look up the word 'Muggle.'
Eriol deftly flipped through the pages until he found the word. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: A boarding school; Arguably the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the British Isles. Current Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore, Deputy Headmistress: Minerva McGonagall ("Oh," said Sakura softly). Faculty contains some of the most powerful wizards and witches of our time. For more information on Hogwarts read Hogwarts: A History." 
"I'll ask the librarian," Sakura told them and disappeared. She returned minutes later with a
somewhat tattered copy of Hogwarts: A History.
"I got a card and checked this out. Why don't you put it in the Flourish & Blotts bag?"
Eriol had just done so when they heard faint screaming. "Death Eaters!" someone shouted, and
the few people in the library disappeared.
"Hoe," murmured Sakura.
Eriol sent their bags back to his mansion and followed Syaoran and Sakura as they raced out the
doors. The three hesitated once outside.
"I'll meet you two up above," Eriol said. "I want to get a good look at these people, and you
already have."
Sakura nodded and the two disappeared. Eriol raced down the path and stopped short. The streets
were chaos, full of blinding flashes. Stores were on fire and those who hadn't Disapparated
couldn't or wouldn't because they were with children. Death Eaters laughed at the destruction,
joying their victims before killing them in the end. There was pitifully little resistance.
"Mama!" a small boy screamed, having been separated in the panic.
Eriol swooped down on him just in time. The ground he had been standing on exploded.
"Picture your mother," Eriol said through gritted teeth. "Quickly!"
This was not difficult as he had wishing desperately for her. Eriol followed the connection
between the mother and child and dumped him in her arms before rushing away. The witch had
no time to thank him and dashed away from the destruction.
He transported himself to the roof next to the now-visible Sakura and Syaoran.
"What a waste," Sakura murmured, watching in horror as the stores were plundered and
ransacked.
"Poor little wizards all alone. Allow me to assist you," said a harsh, unfamiliar voice.
The three spun around quickly and saw two Death Eaters had crept up behind them.
"How dare you call us cowards," the one on the left said. It sounded like a woman. She
brandished her wand.
"You impudent child!" she screeched.
"No child," returned Syaoran harshly and called upon his sword, swinging it the moment it
appeared in his hands. A glowing arc shot at the woman. It hit her and she staggered backward.
Syaoran frowned. "What happened? It was supposed to throw her off the roof."
The male cast the Killing Curse, but Sakura batted it aside.
Eriol used his staff in a way similar to Syaoran's attack. The man simply staggered back as well.
"Attacks don't work well on them," Sakura murmured. She flung her arms wide and ropes of iron
bound them to the roof. They struggled in vain. The ropes held. "Anyone corrupted by evil will
not be able to free them, but will be bound as well," Sakura said. "Only someone who works for
the Light will be able to free them."
She, Syaoran, and Eriol teleported back to Eriol's mansion.
Sakura turned on Eriol. "Why don't attacks work well on them?" she demanded, hands on hips.
"Sakura, I have no idea. I never knew wizards and witches existed until two weeks ago," Eriol
said wearily.
"Let's concentrate on a more immediate problem," Syaoran suggested. "Such as how to get to
Hogwarts and their government or newspaper buildings."
Eriol pulled a pamphlet out of his pocket. "I took this off of one of those foreign-looking witches."
Sakura read the title. "A Guide to Wizarding London. Aren't they going to get lost?" she asked
worriedly.
"Nah," said Eriol carelessly. "Everyone in the group had one."
They crowded around the brochure.
"There!" exclaimed Sakura, pointing at a bullet on the list of popular sights.
"Eriol-sama," Nakuru said delightedly. "I didn't know you were back." She pouted. "I can't find
Suppi. Have you seen him?"
"Spinel!" exclaimed Eriol. "I forgot all about him!" He opened his bag and pulled out a rather
traumatized guardian by the wings. "I'm sorry, Spinel."
"No problem," he said dazedly. "I'll just recover in the library." He waved back and forth in that
direction, Nakuru following, prodding him in the correct direction every once in a while.
"I need to remember not to run while carrying Spinel in my bag," said Eriol ruefully.
Syaoran had been studying the map while that had been going on. "The Ministry of Magic is next
to the Leaky Cauldron, perhaps another block or two past it. I think the newspaper building was
one of the ones decimated today."
"Well, we've got two buildings between the three of us," said Eriol cheerfully.
"Nakuru and Spinel Sun aren't coming?" asked Sakura.
"Nakuru is not the . . . sneaky type," said Eriol carefully. "She's even worse when Spinel is with
her."
"True," Sakura conceded. "Tomoyo will be here in a couple days. Then we can have two per
building. That should be all right, except she has to go to college in a little over a week."
"Then we'll just have to do this in a week," said Eriol, as he scanned the brochure.
"We're supposed to learn their entire history and spells within a week?!" exclaimed Syaoran.
"Why not? Oh, look at this. Diagon Alley is the oldest Wizarding Community in the world. Built
in the early 1100s A.D., hundreds of witches and wizards worldwide visit this town daily."
"They only go back to the 1100s?" remarked Syaoran. "We go back hundreds of years before
that."
Eriol stood and stretched. "I'm going to go study some of those books. Tomorrow we'll teleport
to Edinburgh and drive up to Hogwarts, just in case someone is sensitive to sorcery."
"I'm not going to trust myself in a car with you as the driver," growled Syaoran. "Oof." Eriol had
tossed his large book at Syaoran.
"I suggest you get started reading. Who knows? This might be interesting."
"Hoe," murmured Sakura. Reading English for too long gave her a headache.
"Poppy," snapped Minerva. "I am perfectly healthy."
"Stop making a scene," said Poppy cheerfully as she rummaged through the potions cupboard.
"You're worse than the children."
Minerva gave the students in the Infirmary a quelling look, daring them to say anything. They
were intelligent enough not to, although one girl, Sharon from Hufflepuff, had her face buried in
her pillow. Her shoulders were shaking with what Minerva strongly suspected was laughter.
"I'll make you a deal," said Poppy, returning with a glass phial. "If you drink this - all of it - I'll let
you go."
Minerva studied the dark, murky substance dubiously. "I strongly suspect Severus poisons these
potions. What is it?"
"Just something to keep you strong, healthy, and awake. Cheers," said Madam Pomfrey sweetly,
handing her the phial.
Minerva grimaced and threw back her head, downing the potion.
"Go McGonagall," a particularly brave Ravenclaw boy by the name of Jeremy cheered.
"You're telling me that a Potions Master can't make that taste less like sh-" Poppy cut her off. "Minerva!" she exclaimed, scandalized. "There are students in the room. And
the Headmaster," she added belatedly. "And anyway, I think Severus makes it as nasty as he can
for a reason."
"Yes," Minerva muttered crossly. "It suits his personality."
Sharon fell off the bed, her head firmly buried in her pillow. The other patients were slightly more
composed, only letting out small muffled giggles.
"Sharon, if you don't watch that wrist it'll take twice as long to heal. Back in bed," ordered Poppy.
Minerva quickly left with Albus.
"If I had known how entertaining your trips to the Hospital Wing are, I would come with you
every time."
She snorted and headed for her office. "I'll be sure to get you front row tickets," she said sourly.
"This is all a rather large coincidence," Sakura said suddenly, in an attempt to alleviate the
boredom as she stared out the back window of the car. They had just left Edinburgh in a rented
They had spent the day before reading the books they had purchased at Flourish & Blotts. It had been surprisingly interesting, although Sakura had had some trouble with Ancient Spells and Their Origins. The English terms were very technical and difficult to read, and the book was very dry.

"How so?" asked Syaoran, from the passenger seat.

"Well, a severely injured witch just 'happens' to land in such a way that I can't help but find her, and she ends up with one of the few people who can help, and will, and Japanese 'happens' to be the only foreign language she can speak, while English is mine," she said.

"There are no coincidences in this world," began Eriol.

"Only the inevitable," Sakura chimed in. "Yes, I know. I was being facetious."

They fell silent again and Sakura turned back to her book, wincing as the car went over a rather large bump, cracking her head against the window.

An hour later Eriol looked over at Syaoran. "Take over?" he requested quietly.

Syaoran glanced in the back and his mouth twitched at the sight of Sakura huddled in her sweatshirt, sleeping, book forgotten in her lap. "Sure," he whispered back.

Eriol pulled over and they switched places.

"I don't know where I'm going," Syaoran said.

"Just keep heading north," Eriol told him, and closed his eyes, searching, poking, prodding for the large magical barrier that shouldn't be too far ahead.

He found it and touched it, flinching as it sparked. Realizing that Syaoran was heading in the right direction, he returned to examining the castle. It would be difficult to get in with so many layers of foreign spells, but it was possible.

"Left," Eriol murmured and Syaoran complied. "Right, and then straight on until you reach a forest. Stop there."

"We're going to have to walk through this," Eriol said. "It's the thinnest part and I didn't see any roads leading to Hogwarts."

Syaoran turned around and shook Sakura. "Wake up," he said. "It's time to go."

Sakura batted his hand away. "Five more minutes, 'Niichan," she muttered.


"What?!" shouted Syaoran as Sakura blinked her eyes open.

"What?" she asked.

"Never mind," Syaoran said, shooting a glare at their resident demon. "We need to walk through the trees, and then we'll be at Hogwarts."

"Right," she said groggily, and sat up, opening the door. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Here you will spend most of your time running into the last person(s) you wish to see, getting into sticky situations that could have been avoided, and overhearing important, secret conversations, not necessarily in that order. Oh, and no one will notice the extra person who suddenly appears in any class, with any House, in any year.

P.S. The Minister of Magic is a bloody idiot. The Headmaster, however, is not.
Taking one's chances is like taking a bath, because sometimes you end up feeling comfortable and warm, and sometimes there is something terrible lurking around that you cannot see until it is too late and you can do nothing else but scream and cling to a plastic duck.
-Lemony Snicket, The Slippery Slope

If you understand, things are just as they are. If you do not understand, things are just as they are.
-Zen saying

Like an obelisk towards which the principal streets of a town converge, the strong will of a proud spirit stands prominent and commanding in the middle of the art of war.
-Clausewitz, On War

It was a big castle.
It was a very big castle.
It was a very very big castle.
These thoughts occupied Sakura's mind when she wasn't cursing the barriers.
Sakura felt very small. She was beginning to regret having volunteered to stay at Hogwarts. Of course, she probably would have ended up there anyway, since Eriol and Syaoran were both much more skilled at doing research than she was, Syaoran having to do that sort of thing all the time in the Li Clan's library, and Eriol being the book type of person, never mind his being the half reincarnation of a sorcerer who had been very big on research.
Sakura regretted being so persuasive. Her decision had been challenged, mostly by Syaoran. He wanted her to be with someone, preferably himself.
"Would you rather leave Eriol on his own?" she had asked.
"Are you crazy?" he demanded.
"Then you'd rather Eriol and myself be alone together?"
Syaoran had turned several shades of red and had had trouble replying.
"All right then," Sakura had said. The discussion was closed.
Sakura was now willing to reopen the discussion.
The three of them had debated on whether the boys should accompany her inside, but one look at the barrier said everything. It was tangled, confusing, foreign, and contained several layers, and the boys, having gotten in, would have to get out again. It was decided that it wasn't worth the effort.
"Careful," said Eriol. They had discovered that a portal of communication could get through easily, so Eriol was using the window to help her through while Syaoran drove the car a safe distance away. Since Sakura couldn't very well go tearing through and alert everyone and his brother that she was there, she had been slipping through layer by layer. In other words, once she could ascertain the structure of the shield, she could become insubstantial to it and slip through undetected. This was tiresome work that required patience and subtlety; neither being one of
Sakura's strong traits.
"I am being careful," Sakura snapped, gingerly feeling the next curtain of silver wizardry. She was trying to do this quickly and accurately, since she wasn't invisible to spying eyes, and any personal spells or otherwise had to be put on hold so as not to interfere with the shields. It was enough to make anyone irritable.

Eriol, or rather the portal that showed his head, swung around, looking at the ground. "Sakura, do you sense that? Silly question," he answered quickly, before Sakura could. She was limited to the Sight and insubstantiability, and was much too preoccupied to go about sensing auras. "Sakura, I think someone's coming."

She growled as she finally made her way through the next layer. Two more left.
"I know this can't be much help, but hurry," hissed Eriol.
"Shut up," she said through gritted teeth. So close. This one was so familiar. Aha. It was like the ward on her house that kept away spying eyes.

"Last one," she whispered.
"Sakura, if you don't solve this one in 10 seconds, someone will see you," Eriol warned.
"I can't go invisible tangled up in this stuff, or it'll set the whole damn thing off," she growled, trying, trying to concentrate.

"Then just push through the last one. Now!"
Sakura did so and then immediately became invisible, reestablishing her personal shields, as well as hiding her aura, in case wizards could see or sense them.

At that moment a giant, bearded, wild-looking man strode out of the woods, swinging some sort of dead bird by the feet and whistling something tuneless. To Sakura immense frustration he was allowed through the inner barriers unchallenged, whilst she had spent at least 20 minutes trying to get through, not counting the outer barriers that seemed to prevent Muggles from getting close. She doubted he even realized there was anything there.
She sighed and trotted towards the doors as soon as he was out of earshot. "Bye Eriol," she murmured. "I'll call you tonight."

"Bye," he said, and blinked out.

Sakura cracked the door open, peeking inside. Seeing no one, she slipped inside and shut it as quietly as she could.

I'm in, she realized giddily, and clamped her mouth shut on her giggles. Wondering where everyone was she glanced at her clock and decided that they must be eating lunch.

She followed the smell of food and the dull roar of conversation to another set of large doors. With any luck they wouldn't spy the doors opening and closing by themselves.

Her stomach growled as she surveyed the large room. Four tables were set up with a fifth at the front of the room. That was where the professors sat. The stone floor was worn smooth by the passage of many feet of students and professors across time. This place was old. Sakura could feel it in the stone, in the very magic that hung in the air like a blanket.

She wasn't welcome. She was foreign to their world, uninvited. The castle knew her to be an intruder and she wondered what power the Headmaster had over it. Sakura guessed that they were connected in some way, and perhaps Minerva had some limited authority over the magics as well.

She recalled the vague purpose of each shield outside the castle. As she had slipped through she could feel that a few of the outer layers were to keep non-magic people - Muggles - away. Many of the shields were for protection and an anti-Apparition spell extended several yards into the forest, just inside the one that kept out uninvited, dangerous beasts.

Sakura wished she knew which alarm she had set off and hoped it was just something minor, that they would think it was a glitch.

Sakura looked up and her eyes widened. Sugoi, she mouthed, not that anyone could see her.
The ceiling was a mirror image of the sky outside, bright blue with a few fluffy white clouds. It took her a moment to realize that it was a spell, nearly blinding herself in the process. Wizardry was so flashy and bright. Sorcery was so much more subtle, which made it more difficult to track a sorcerer.

Next she noticed the banners, one over each table. The students under the snake decal were rather
shifty and angry looking. The other students seemed to go to great lengths to avoid them. Sakura wondered why.

Her stomach growled again, reminding her how hungry she was. She stood in a corner and made sure her avert spell was in place. It would keep anyone from noticing her or finding her suspicious if they did. Only then did she let the invisibility drop. At the same instant she summoned her black robe and slipped into it before making her way to the nearest table and slipping into an unoccupied seat.

Thankfully, nobody tried to start a conversation and she ate absentmindedly, examining the entire room, and especially each professor. 20 minutes later she gathered some food into a napkin and exited the room behind a group of girls.

Now, she thought, dusting her hands off. It's time to explore and find a place to stay in the night. The first floor's main feature was the Great Hall (she learned the name later).

The next floor was full of classrooms and closets. Sakura had the surprise of her life when the stairway began to move while she was still climbing. She yelped and hung on to the rail for dear life. When it stopped she waited to make sure it would stay before stepping out into a dimly lit hall.

"This looks promising," she murmured. Just then she heard a shuffling around the corner and someone's loud breathing. Without thinking about it, Sakura summoned Jump and leapt up onto a ledge conveniently located fairly close to the ceiling.

Looking down she saw a rather grubby old man with stringy hair. His aura had an unpleasant feel to it, and was most remarkable in that it only contained a tint of silver. Behind him strode a rather mangy cat, nothing like Tabby-chan (Sakura had come to separate Minerva's two forms in her mind, so that the cat was Tabby-chan and the woman was Minerva).

The cat paused and sniffed the air.

"What is it, Mrs. Norris?" croaked the man. "A student wandering the halls during class?" He sounded delighted and Sakura lay as still as she could.

Don't look up, she prayed. Eriol had warned her not to use more magic than she needed in case the Dumbledore-sensei had ways of discovering her.

Sakura sighed in relief when he turned the corner and dropped back to the ground. "Whew," she murmured, brushing herself off. She leaned against the wall and sighed. "This is much harder than I thought," she murmured, and slapped the wall behind her.

"Kyaaaaaa!!" Sakura shrieked as she fell backwards, through an opening in the wall that definitely hadn't been there before.

"Oof. Owwww," she said weakly as she landed on her back. The opening closed. Don't panic, she told herself. Don't panic, you'll be fine, you can get out of here.

It took her a moment to realize that there was a faint light emanating from the walls.

"Okay," she murmured to herself, "it's not totally dark, and I can find a way out. I can..." She trailed off as she looked around the room. The room contained only a desk and an empty case. It was clean, but felt rather deserted. Sakura felt for the echoes of human presences, and grinned.

The most recent echo was from at least two months ago.

Perfect, she thought. This was the perfect place for her to stay. It was out of the way, and the hallway was nearly deserted. A few 'avoid me' spells would keep her unnoticed and unknown. It only took her a moment to take her baggage out of a pocket of space. She simply made an unzipping motion and the bags appeared on the floor.

"Right," she murmured, rifling through her backpack, searching for her cell phone. "I promised Eriol I'd call him when I found a room."

Retrieving the small pink phone she quickly dialed the number and put it to her ear. She frowned, puzzled. There was no ringing, only a heavy silence that seemed to grow with each second.

Sakura examined the phone closely and her eyes widened when she realized what was happening.

Too late.

She shrieked when the cell phone exploded in her hand.

"Ow," Sakura muttered, absentely rubbing the cuts on her hand as she stared at the bits of plastic scattered at her feet. What am I going to tell Tomoyo?
She shook herself and scowled. There was too much magical interference for technology to work. She berated herself for not figuring this out, although how she could have, she wasn’t sure. Sorcery was a natural force. It didn’t matter what was near, it only affected what it was intended to.
Sakura would have to be careful of what she did. Knowing only sorcery and creatures of magic would be a liability more than it would be an asset.
Right now, she wondered how she would be getting messages between Eriol and Syaoran, and herself. She supposed Spinel could do it until Kero arrived. They would either be identified as harmless animals or inanimate objects by the barriers surrounding Hogwarts, so it wouldn’t be a problem for them to get through.
Sakura sighed and decided to wait until the appointed time before opening a window between herself and the two boys. It would be less likely to startle them, or anyone around them.
Maybe telepathy would get through? she wondered, but decided to try when she was more accustomed to her surroundings.
Sakura turned to leave and was happy to find a doorknob on this side of the wall/door. Now, if only she could figure out how she had gotten in . . .
It took her a few minutes, once outside, to discover the small hole in the upper corner of a stone. If she hit the stone directly over the hole, the door would open.
All right, thought Sakura, delighted at how well she was doing so far. Let's explore some more.
Now that she had found a room to stay in, Sakura decided to begin getting to know the castle seriously. She brought a notebook and a pencil to roughly sketch a map to remind her of where things were. It was nowhere near the correct scale, just boxes for rooms and lines to show approximately where the doors were located. She was by no means an artist, nor an architect, but the map was somewhat discernible. Sakura was worried about how to find secret passages and rooms (there had to be more than the one she had found) and how to draw them so that she could make some sense of it.
Sakura tensely walked the halls of basement/dungeons, afraid of getting caught even though there were no classes on Sunday and students were technically free to roam the halls. She was not willing to make herself invisible yet.
She stopped when she sensed a presence behind a door, and softly opening the door after checking to make sure that she had her 'notice-me-not' spell in place. It would make everyone overlook her and her actions as unimportant. Their gaze would slide off of her and they would forget her presence if they even took note of it.
A man with black, greasy hair was standing over a cauldron. He looked at her with a small, vague scowl, but his focus immediately returned to his work. He added a drop of some liquid, making the steam billow up and turn a dull copper color.
Sakura retreated back out into the hallway and continued walking. She snickered. "Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble."
"She's in," Eriol said with a sigh as he opened his eyes.
"So what's the problem?" asked Syaoran, gazing fixedly at the road.
"Who said there was anything wrong?" asked Eriol calmly.
"I've known you for years," Syaoran said with a scowl. "Unfortunately," he added under his breath. "I can usually tell when you're not saying something."
"Sakura had a little trouble getting through the wards. A rather large man nearly caught her. She had to push through the last shield, which activated it."
"Tell me again why we're simply researching these people rather than actively talking with and helping them."
"My dear little descendant," Eriol began in Mandarin, ignoring the grinding of teeth. "Do not fear going forward slowly; fear only to stand still."
"Don't quote Chinese proverbs at me," Syaoran growled, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel tightly. He realized that he had ceased to pay attention to his driving and abruptly swerved to the left, back into his own lane.
Eriol gripped the door handle rather tightly. "Even a thousand-mile journey begins with the first
This time Syaoran barely managed to keep from going over the edge of a ravine. Eriol had become rather pale and decided that his good health was more important than needling the driver. It was going to be a long trip back to Edinburgh.
"40 kilometer per hour turn! 40 kilometer per hour turn!" Eriol yelped, seeing that the arrow on the speedometer was hovering somewhere in the upper nineties.
"Tomoyo's coming the day after tomorrow," Eriol said conversationally after a half an hour of silence.
Syaoran grunted in acknowledgement. "Tuesday, right?" he asked.
"Yes. Nakuru and Spinel have agreed to pick her up and escort her to Hogwarts. She should be able to get in without any problem since she doesn't have any magic. And since she's been exposed to magic for years, any Muggle-averting spells shouldn't have an affect on her."
"Interesting theory," Syaoran muttered.
"Sakura will be there in case anything goes wrong," Eriol replied with a shrug.
They were silent the rest of the way to Edinburgh. Once Eriol had returned the car, they teleported back to his mansion.
"Ready?" asked Eriol after hefting his duffel bag over one shoulder.
"Hai," replied Syaoran, wearing a rather large backpack. "Are you sure you know where this Ministry of Magic is?"
"I've got a map. How hard can it be?"
"Jeez," Sakura panted, leaning against a railing and wiping her brow. "I am so . . . out of shape."
She was currently on the sixth floor, having explored every inch of the levels below. So far she had found three secret rooms and five secret passageways. She still hadn't found out where the students slept.
Right now she was climbing a particularly large amount of stairs that she assumed led up to one of the towers. She wasn't quite sure how she got there or where exactly she was. Sakura hadn't thought to mark her progress on the sketches of the castle.
If she failed to find her way back, she'd just fly out the window and come back in the front door. She hoped she wouldn't have to. She needed to be able to find her way around the castle relatively well.
"All right," she muttered. "I can do this. Just a little more."
Sakura looked up at the stairs and groaned.
"Okay, a lot more." She scowled and dragged herself upward.
Sakura nearly banged her head against the trap door before she realized that she had reached the top. Which was very good, since her legs were beginning to tremble.
"Right," she wheezed. "After this I'm going down to eat dinner and then sleep for several days until I no longer hurt." Sakura realized that she had been talking to herself constantly and should probably stop.
She opened the door and dropped the notice-me-not spell upon seeing that no one was there. A telescope in front of the large window across the room showed her that this tower was used for star-gazing.
Another smaller window let in light from the setting sun, spilling onto . . .
Sakura gasped.
"Eric Copper and Aliza Zimmerman?" asked a voice in the dark.
The hooded and masked man trembled. "My lord," he began nervously, "Copper is dead and Zimmerman has been taken custody."
Silence. The hiss of a snake.
"The attack was successful. It took the Aurors a long time to arrive in Diagon Alley. Durn and myself were checking the rooves for any wizards when we stumbled across Copper and Zimmerman. They were . . ." Here he paused and licked his lips nervously.
"Go on," hissed the voice.
The Death Eater gulped. "They were bound to the roof in ropes of iron. Durn and I used every spell we could think of, but nothing would work. Then the Aurors began to arrive and I could see
my fellows Disapparating. I was about to leave as well when Copper began screaming, cursing
the three children who had done this to him."
"Potter?" Now the voice was cold, full of hate and loathing.
"No, my lord. Zimmerman was more sane. She told us that there were two boys and one girl, and
one boy looked similar to Potter. She had never seen them before, but they had an Asian look
about them.
"Then I was forced to leave because of the presence of Aurors, but not before the iron vines
shifted their grip on Copper and snapped his neck."
"No matter," said the Dark Lord. "Copper was a fool. Zimmerman was loyal, but there are more
to replace her. Prepare the Dark Beasts and the newer Death Eaters. They will be unleashed
within a fortnight."
"Where shall I t-tell them they will be located, m-m-master?" stuttered the man.
Voldemort smiled and the man found it much worse than his frown. "They will be hounding
Hogwarts."
His hand rested on a giant snake and he threw back his head and laughed. The Death Eater
scurried away before the Dark Lord decided to punish him.
"How will you deal with my army, Dumbledore, when they hound your school and haunt your
students? Will you barricade yourself in that castle? Will you shut yourself and your students off
from the world? Or will you fight and allow me the chance to kill you?"
Harry stiffened and his hand automatically flew to his scar. It had been hurting on and off for over
a year, but it had been a while since it had been this bad. Voldemort was happy about something,
and perhaps a little angry at the same time.
"Watch it," hissed Draco. "You almost knocked over the powdered dragon scales."
Every Sunday students targeted by Voldemort were given self-defense lessons, both magic and
Muggle, as well as an extra class that would help offense and defense. This evening it was
Potions. They were learning to brew and identify poisons, as well as their antidotes. Harry was
just waiting for Snape to slip a poison into his cup.
"Sorry," Harry muttered through gritted teeth.
"Is there something you wish to share with the class, Potter?" asked Snape with a sneer.
Yes, Professor. I would just like everyone to know that Voldemort is happy right now, thought
Harry sarcastically.
"No, Professor," he replied.
"Then I suggest you pay more attention. 10 points from Gryffindor."
Draco studiously ignored the exchange and meticulously added the crushed beetle wings.
Harry suppressed a sigh and avoided glancing in Ron and Hermione's direction, not wanting to
see their sympathetic glances. He returned to cutting the stalks of celery and glanced speculatively
in Draco's direction. Just a year ago he would have laughed himself sick if someone had told him
he and Draco would become friends.
At the end of their sixth year Voldemort had attacked the train when they arrived back in London.
The older students and members of Dumbledore's Army (it had been re-established at the
beginning of sixth year) had held their ground until Aurors arrived.
Five First Years, two Second Years, and seven other students had died. Many others had been
severely injured and taken to Saint Mungo's.
Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been the main targets. In the confusion Hermione had gotten
separated from the others and ended up near a group of Slytherins. She wasn't one to listen to
prejudices, so had trusted them at her back and concentrated on fighting the Death Eaters.
One of the Slytherin students had decided to follow in her parents' footsteps and fired a Bone-
Crushing curse at Hermione's back.
Draco had protected her, saved her life, and the girl had been taken into custody.
That one act had betrayed the Malfoy and he spent the summer at Grimmauld Place.
In his month at the Dursley's, Harry had had a lot of time to think about his actions. Although Ron
had thought that Malfoy was a Death Eater-in-training, Harry had just thought of him as an
insufferable, arrogant git.
His assessment was fairly accurate. Harry noticed with some amusement as Draco regally held out a hand for the celery without saying a word. He complied and went back to his contemplations.

Harry had returned to Grimmauld Place in the middle of July, still unsure of how to deal with this new guest. It didn't help that he still felt the hole that Sirius' death had left in his life. Hermione and her family had been moved to Grimmauld Place for their protection. Ron and his family were there as well. Back then they had only just begun moving targeted families to safe houses.

Draco had been quiet, reticent. He and Hermione had developed a grudging friendship. Ron avoided him as much as was humanly possible.

But there were some things that happened that you couldn't help but become friends afterward. Saving lives was one of them. It could also lead to hero worship, but Harry doubted that applied to Draco.

He couldn't even believe that he'd used the words "hero," "worship," and "Draco," in the same sentence.

By the time Hogwarts was in session the four of them had become friends. It took a lot of work on Ron's part, but when Ginny joined the group, she'd had no trouble. Which was rather strange, since Draco and his father had terrified her since her first year when she'd been possessed by Tom Riddle and left as basilisk bait.

Harry shivered and slowly stirred the cauldron. "Basilisk bait" had a rather ominous ring to it. "Right, Potter. Let's bottle this up and get cleaned up," Draco ordered.

"Right away, Your Highness."

The sarcasm was lost on Malfoy.

"I thought you knew what you were doing?" said Syaoran.

"How was I supposed to know that we'd need a code?" demanded Eriol.

"Doesn't it say in the guidebook?"

"If it had been, don't you think I'd have used it by now?" retorted Eriol.

"Who knows how your mind works?" muttered Syaoran. "Right. Stand back."

"Wait! You're not going to blow it up, are you?"

"Yes, of course. My goal is to alert everyone to our presence and make it twice as hard to do our spying," replied Syaoran sarcastically.

"Never let it be said that Syaoran Li was unnecessarily friendly," muttered Eriol. He smiled enigmatically when Syaoran shot him a glare. "Go on," he said encouragingly. "You can hotwire a car, I'm sure a telephone booth is no problem."

"Who told you about that?" sputtered Syaoran. "Never mind." He didn't really want to know.

Syaoran turned to the telephone and narrowed his eyes, using the Sight to examine the magic wiring. Eriol did the same, watching as Syaoran's green threads of magic patiently wove themselves into the silver tangle.

Next, the Li clan leader made a sharp twisting motion, and four squares glowed brightly. "Wait," hissed Eriol, too late. He made a quick motion with both hands and coated a red section with his blue sorcery stifling the alarm a split second it would have been triggered.

Syaoran snapped a finger and the ground beneath them dropped. "Just because they're not as powerful as we are, doesn't mean they don't have the regular precautions. The very fact that they're so weak should make them trickier," warned Eriol in a low voice as they descended into the Ministry of Magic.

Syaoran grunted in acknowledgement. He didn't make some rude comment, which Eriol took as his way of being grateful.

"You're welcome," he told the surly Li cheerfully.

Syaoran's expression darkened.

Then the two of them found themselves in some sort of large lobby. They walked forward cautiously, but there were very few people about; just a few men carrying a large box. One of the wizards cursed and nearly dropped his end. Eriol couldn't be sure, but he thought the box was moving. He wasn't too keen on finding out what sort of large creature happened to be in there,
and was relieved when they passed into an elevator.
He heard Syaoran snort in disgust and turned to see him in front of a fountain. It looked as if it had
been hastily glued together, and then forgotten. Eriol walked closer and saw that Syaoran wasn't
disgusted with the repairs alone (although it looked like several figures had been rendered
headless), but with what the figures represented. A wizard and a witch were the main focus. The
wizard may have been made to look noble, but to Eriol he looked weak and feeble. The witch
looked like an airhead. He immediately recognized the centaur, but it's adoring expression was
foreign. From those centaurs he'd met, none of them had been much given to adoration, especially
not of the human race. One looked like a goblin. Although he'd never met one, a surly, angry
expression would have fit what he had researched better. The last creature was one he didn't
recognize. It cringed devotedly and had somewhat floppy ears. Eriol wasn't positive, but he
thought what it wore as a loincloth was a towel.
"How arrogantly false," sneered Syaoran. "Even if it didn't look like a three year old had glued it
together with less than the full number of pieces, I wouldn't want it to see the light of day."
Eriol wrinkled his nose. "I quite agree. We should be going now, though." His eyes followed
the main hallway, and saw it ended at another elevator after passing a booth where a burly wizard sat
reading a magazine. Several fireplaces lined one wall, looking as if they hadn't been used in years.
Their purpose mystified him. "Let's try this way."
Syaoran shrugged and followed, nearly bumping into Eriol when he stopped short. "Now what?"
he snapped quietly.
"It says wand check-in," Eriol murmured in reply. "I have the one Sakura took, but it's going to
take a minute to replicate it. Shield me."
Syaoran knew he meant magically, from any sensors, and he closed his eyes after moving
between Eriol and the security wizard, just in case. The fountain would block the view of any new
visitors. At least it's good for something, he thought wryly.
"Done," said Eriol, handing a wand to Syaoran. "You might want to change it a bit so they don't
look exactly alike."
Syaoran shrugged, extracted a pocket knife from his pocket, and began whittling away at the
point.
"I should have guessed," muttered Eriol with a lopsided grin.
"Look at this," said Syaoran suddenly. "They put some sort of fur in the middle."
Eriol peered at the gray hair that was sticking out of the tip. "Some sort of magic animal. We'll
analyze it later, after we get into the offices."
The two walked over to the desk. The wizard barely glanced at the wands before handing them
back and waving them through. A red light flashed and a piercing whistle was cut off when the
security wizard tapped his wand on the door.
Eriol and Syaoran were frozen in place, watching the man with some apprehension.
"All righ'," the wizard said. "Where're yer badges?"
"Badges?" asked Eriol in a puzzled, innocent voice he'd perfected years ago.
"Th' ones the spell on the booth gave yeh."
Syaoran and Eriol stared at him blankly. Syaoran had a sinking feeling that maybe he shouldn't
have used such forceful means on the door spell.
"When yeh were asked yer business?"
Syaoran decided it was time to speak up. "We weren't given any badges. Sir," he added as an
afterthought, inwardly glowering.
The wizard groaned. "Don' tell me it's broken again. We jus' had it fixed las' week. The
mechanics're chargin' extra what with You-Know-Who 'n all."
"Terribly sorry, sir, but we really must be going," said Eriol.
"Go on, go on," said the man, stomping over to his desk again. A moment later a paper airplane
went zooming by them and waited in front of the lift.
The moment the two got inside, Eriol made a grab for the paper. "Ow," he muttered as it shocked
him and tried to get away. Eriol shielded his hands from the spell. Luckily, the lift was empty.
"What's it say?" asked Syaoran, looking over his shoulder.
"It's just a note saying that the spell on the MOM entrance needs to be fixed," replied Eriol, rubbing the welt on his hand as soon as he let it go. "Is that how they usually send mail, I wonder?"

"I doubt it," said Syaoran, punching every button in the lift. They really had no idea where they were going. "It's too conspicuous. They probably send it the normal way unless it's an emergency."

"Actually, I think one of the books said something about owls," commented Eriol. "Really. How do they train all of them?" asked Syaoran.

Just then a female voice said, "Level seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office."

"I'll search this floor and you take the next one. Call me when you're done," Syaoran ordered and blinked out of sight.

"Right," agreed Eriol with a mock salute that Syaoran didn't see, before he too became invisible. The lift rattled and ascended another floor. The voice once again rang out. "Level six, Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparition Test Center."

Eriol stepped out and into a stark white corridor. Names and titles were embossed on the doors, none of which meant anything to him. What was the Floor Network? And a Portkey Specialist? And Broom Testers?

He kept walking past the small offices until he came to a large company door that said Brooms: Main Office.

He stepped inside quickly and quietly. The young witch behind the desk didn't even look up, not that she'd see anything if she had.

Eriol peered at what she was reading and fought the urge to snigger. The title read, Ten Ways to Get a Good Wizard and Keep Him. Witches or Muggle teens, they weren't so very different. It was rather sad, really, that one race would profess superiority over another.

He slipped past her and let himself into the back room. It was almost like a hospital for brooms. They were stacked orderly against the wall with a folder to the right of each one. Eriol opened one and scanned the paper inside.


"They actually ride brooms," Eriol whispered in surprise. "Ouch."

However, on further inspection of the various brooms he discovered that there was actually a rather comfortable place to sit. "I definitely need to try this." His eyes glinted with delight and mischief. When this was done with, he had an old-fashioned broom that he didn't need. It would be fun to experiment with.

He stepped through a side door and groaned when he saw the stacks and stacks of paperwork. After nearly a half an hour of investigation, he ascertained that this was a dull occupation. The papers were only laws, regulations, and records.

He stepped out of the office and into the Floo Network's Headquarters. It looked deserted, without even a receptionist in front. Eriol only stayed long enough to discover that Floo powder was a way to travel different places using the fireplace before leaving. The last place was Portkey Headquarters. There were several people waiting or filling out forms. Against one wall was a Portkey schedule in and out of Diagon Alley.

"Number 34," a bored-looking wizard called out and a twitchy witch hurried up to the counter and handed him a sheaf of papers. He examined these for a minute, left, and returned with an empty, battered pop can. The witch took it, shoved it in her purse, and left.

Eriol watched this exchanged, completely uncomprehending. After a long trip to the back room he understood that a Portkey was a timed teleportation spell used on objects that Muggles wouldn't look at twice, much less pick up. By the time he was through and heading back to the lift, Eriol had managed to understand the structure of the spell and was itching to try it out.

Syaoran? he sent to the boy. I'm near the lift. Are you done?
Yes, replied Syaoran, sounding bored to tears. I'll be there in a minute.

Eriol side-stepped a short, somewhat fat, man, and then, with nothing better to do, eavesdropped on his conversation with another wizard in a nearby office.

Eriol quickly grew bored with the fat wizard's obviously fearful babbling about his personal protection spells. His attention was quickly caught when the skinny wizard addressed the man as "Minister Fudge."

Eriol couldn't believe his ears. This weak, terrified, mentally challenged, wizard was their Minister of Magic?!

"They'll be dead by May," he muttered cynically.

"What was that?" demanded the Minister, drawing his wand with a shaky hand.

This gave Eriol an idea and began his invisible, almost harmless torment of the Minister, being sure to leave the other innocent wizard alone.

Syaoran found Eriol hovering near a small, fat man wearing a bowler hat.

Eriol, stop torturing wizards. We have work to do.

He deserves it, the half-reincarnation snorted. You'll never guess who this idiot is.

Can't be anyone important. Syaoran watched the weak man babble incessantly about adding protection to his home and office.

Depends on how important you consider the Minister of Magic to be, Eriol told him derisively.

. . . Surely you jest.

No. I heard him called Minister with my own two ears.

Syaoran blinked, and then said incredulously, Not only is he weak physically, he has very little magic power. I very much doubt his mind is any stronger.

Why do you think I'm making him nervous? Eriol asked, idly producing small breezes and sending them in various directions, often scattering papers.

Syaoran caught one and examined it. This looks promising.

Hm? The other boy leaned close, skimming the details. Ooo. Keep this and remember where we got it so we can return it later. I doubt it would cause any panic if it goes missing, which is an added bonus.

Why do they leave records of former conflicts around for anyone to see anyway? asked Syaoran as they headed for the elevator.

Either they aren't used to war, or they take after their Minister, Eriol suggested, pointing at Fudge right before they stepped into the lift. The seat of his pants ripped, and the wizard remained oblivious.

"Kami-sama," Syaoran said suddenly. "Are all wizards and witches like that?"

"I sure hope not. We'll see what Sakura says about Hogwarts' Headmaster and staff tonight."

They reached the next level and the quickly-becoming-annoying-voice spoke once again. "Level five, Department of International Magical Cooperation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law, and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats." This floor sounded promising.

"Same as what we did with the first two floors," Syaoran said and stepped out. Unfortunately, a few people were waiting to get in, and Eriol had to do some fancy footwork to stay out of their way, being invisible still. Lunch break must be about over, Eriol thought to himself regretfully.

"Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau."

The two of them met once more in an hour and continued down.

I think Level Five would be a good place for us to stay. Although I didn't find any private records yet, I'm sure that's the best place to look; it's just a matter of time, Syaoran told Eriol from his position on the ceiling. The lift was packed with people and there was an increasing risk of getting their eyes poked out by an errant paper airplane.

I agree, but we should look at the rest of the floors first, Eriol replied.

"Level three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad Obliviator Headquarters, and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee."

Ja ne, said Syaoran, relieved to get out of such an enclosed space intact.
The lift descended and Eriol impatiently waited as it passed the Atrium. Finally, "Department of Mysteries," was announced, and Eriol stepped out. By then there was only one unpleasant-looking wizard in the lift. He kept his hood up as he walked up to the door and inserted his wand in a hole, murmuring some long phrase in a foreign language at the same time.

Magic flared so brightly that Eriol shut off even his natural bit of Sight to keep from being blinded. When he dared open his eyes, the wizard was gone.

Eriol searched for a weak spot in the spells and pushed through without any preparation. An alarm sounded immediately and Eriol caught a glimpse of a room with hundreds of strange objects before wizards and witches Apparated into the room and he was forced to teleport away before they discovered him.

"As I thought," Eriol murmured, lounging in the Atrium waiting for Syaoran. "Pure research, no corruption from this Dark Lord. Objects they are still discovering the use and origin of. An attempt to help the war."

Eriol had sensed the raw power of that Department and his intrusion and glance into the room had confirmed that this would be a formidable department to explore, and impossible to stay in undetected. He would just have to trust that there was nothing essential in that department that needed knowing. It was rather frustrating to have to give up so easily but that was life. It didn't help soothe his curiosity though.

Syaoran met him twenty minutes later. "Nothing interesting," he said. "I think Level five's Room of Records is where we should stay. Did you find anything?"

"Nothing that would help," Eriol replied truthfully. "Then let's go."

Sunlight poured through the window and onto a table where a cat no larger than Sakura's palm lay on its side, dozing. She wasn't fooled by its shape, and at her gasp, the kitten shot up to its feet and crouched near the window.

"Rithlan," murmured Sakura soothingly. "I am Sakura, Mistress of the Cards, and wish no harm upon you."

Rithlan were a sorcerer's miscast spells that had never fulfilled their purpose. They were extremely rare, and the older they were, the more sentient they became. Sakura judged that this one was extremely old by it's ability to know how to blend in to its environment. Rithlan rarely took on a concrete shape. They appeared to be no more than a spark of light to a keen eye. The 'cat' crept up to her and took in her scent, examined her aura. Abruptly it disappeared and she felt the quiver in the air above her shoulder.

"Friendly, aren't you?" she commented, gently cupping her hand around the spark. "You must have been here since before this school was built."

Sakura was delightedly surprised when it bobbed up and down in agreement.

"You must know this school very well," Sakura continued, an idea forming in her mind.

"It'll give you something to do, and I'm sure - "

She stopped when she felt the invisible presence nuzzle her cheek. It had been centuries since the Rithlan had been recognized, much less kept the company of a sorceress.

"It's agreed. Do you eat anything? I have some food around here if you're hungry . . ."

But the spark swung side to side in negation.

"All right. I think I'll call you something other than Rithlan. That's like saying, 'Hey, human.' How about Orenda-san? I saw it in one of the books we bought yesterday."

Sakura received a sort of mental purr and she grinned. "All right. Um . . . how do I get back down to the third floor?" She decided that she had explored enough of the castle for today, and she was still getting adjusted to the time zone, anyway. So, somewhat tired but happy, Sakura followed Orenda with a slight spring to her step.

She passed unchallenged through mostly deserted hallways, and had only a little trouble getting into her room. Once there, she summoned several blankets from home, including her comforter and
sleeping bag, before climbing into bed and falling asleep with a murmured, "Thanks," to Orenda. She was woken what seemed like minutes later by a familiar voice calling her name. "Wake up," a male voice hissed. "Sakura."
"Is anyone else in there?" asked another familiar voice. "I don't know. Sakura!"
She grunted and peered around bleerily. "Ima wa nanji desu ka?" she asked, automatically slipping into Japanese.
"It's about 9:00, when we promised we'd contact you."
That was Eriol, Sakura realized. "Gome - I mean, sorry," she said. "I was tired and fell asleep." She set herself cross-legged in front of the portal. Orenda zoomed over and settled by her shoulder.
Sakura giggled at the boys' shocked expressions. "This is Orenda-san," she introduced. I found her in one of the towers. Orenda, this is Eriol-san and Syaoran-kun." She turned back to her friends. "She's agreed to help me navigate the castle. How are you two doing at the Ministry?"
"We've settled on the fifth floor in the Room of Records. Eriol thinks that they've hidden the records of their Dark Lords, so we're looking for them."
Eriol said, "Sakura, I've been studying this war against Voldemort. Apparently, it's the second war. A baby named Harry Potter defeated him about 17 years ago, and he was resurrected again about two years ago. Harry Potter attends Hogwarts. I think you should find him, and trail him part time as well.
"Also, I believe that Voldemort favors guerilla war tactics."
"Go-ree-la?" said Sakura questioningly, her accent becoming more pronounced. "Isn't that a type of monkey?"
Eriol and Syaoran sweatdropped. "Not exactly," the raven-haired boy replied. "It's a hit-and-run tactic, used to strike quickly when the enemy least suspects it. Voldemort favors subtle tactics, but that doesn't stop him from an all-out battle."
"I think that the forces of Light are losing ground to Voldemort," Syaoran added. "They've been lucky, but Voldemort is willing to harm innocents and more to achieve his goal."
"All right," Sakura sighed. "I guess that's it. Let's do this again tomorrow. Same time?"
The other two nodded in agreement and the window faded out.
She sighed and stood. "Orenda-san. Do you know where the center of the magic is?"
The Rithlan bobbed and Sakura followed it out the door and down the stairs. The halls were lit with candles and torches, and Sakura shivered, wishing she'd thought to bring her jacket.
Twice she was forced to hide from patrolling teachers before she was led to the Great Hall. "Here?" asked Sakura in surprise.
Orenda sped on, and Sakura followed her up to the teacher's table, and then along it until she reached a door. It opened into a small empty room, and Sakura could feel the supernatural stillness at the center of the web.
"Here," she whispered, blinded by the darkness, but seeing the vast web of magic that infused the school. This was old, centuries old. A reflection of Camelot, tied to the threads of fate. It was here she sent out her sorcery. It was here she immersed herself in the foreign magic that steeped the castle and its surroundings. She lost herself to the castle, became one with the castle, breathed with the castle. A beat sounded in her head and she could not tell whose heart it was. I am a friend, her intentions cried. I am here to help, and I must be a secret. You guard so many already, keep this one until we are ready to show them. Until we understand who and what these people are.
Slowly the castle ceased to fight her presence. Slowly it accepted her and slowly she regained her individuality.
When she emerged from the room, the quarter moon was over halfway across the sky. Her watch read 3:00. Sakura had been in there for over five hours. Kami-sama, I think I'm going to be sick. She sank down onto a chair and concentrated on taking deep, even breaths. Her muscles ached, her head pounded, and her vision wavered. She hadn't realized what an averse affect the witchcraft and wizardry would have on her body. The last time
she'd felt like this was when she'd been attempting to absorb shaman power (she'd been a rookie then). There were different types of power in the world, and one needed to gradually get used to each one when in its environment.

"God, it feels like a hangover," Sakura moaned softly. "I think I need aspirin. Is it safe to down the full bottle?"

A nudge at her elbow startled her and her head shot up. Spots of light danced in her vision and she really wished she hadn't done it so quickly. When she could focus her gaze, it landed on Orenda in owl form with a small bottle in her claws.

"Huh?" Sakura inquired intelligently, taking the bottle and staring at it as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world. "You want me to drink it?"

Orenda nodded, so Sakura grimaced and swallowed. Her aches and pains quickly disappeared, as did her overwhelming need to hurl.

"Arigatou gozaimashita," Sakura said with a grin. "I wonder where you got that?"

Several hours later, Severus Snape could be heard bellowing about a missing healing potion, but by then Sakura was curled up in bed, taking a much needed nap.

Next Chapter: Welcome to Club Death Eater. Here we have many spare, useless Muggles for your entertainment, as well as enemies and failures. Beware the manic master or you'll be next. And remember, the Ministry will not discover your hiding place no matter how many times you use the Unforgivables.

P.S. The rat will always get away and the spy will never get caught. Mostly.
"Luck is my middle name," said Rincewind, indistinctly. "Mind you, my first name is Bad."
-Terry Pratchett, Interesting Times

Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog
Adder's fork and blindworm's sting
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.
Shakespeare, Macbeth: Act 4

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.
-Robert Herrick, To the Virgins to Make Much of Time

Sakura bolted down her breakfast, still too tired to take in what she was eating. Orenda, being the incredibly thoughtful Rithlan that she was, had awakened her at the end of breakfast when students were also bolting down their food and rushing off to get to class. She was still frazzled from her late night rendezvous and not at all pleased that she'd forgotten to tell Eriol and Syaoran about the cell phone.
She'd thrown on the top set of clothes in her suitcase, too tired to be nervous about what Tomoyo could possibly have packed, and sported a black sweater, black leggings, and her old tennis shoes. It was surprisingly inconspicuous, and Sakura wondered what exactly she was going to be wearing toward the end of the week.
With a sigh, she ran her fingers through her hair and winced as the only piece of jewelry she wore got caught in her brown tresses. She muttered a curse as she untangled her silver bracelet. It had been a birthday present from Eriol and Tomoyo. The bracelet was a plain silver band about a quarter of an inch thick with small bells spaced evenly around it. A silver chain attached the bracelet to a ring decorated with a sun, moon, and stars. Eriol had assured her that the bells could be heard only by spirits who wished her ill luck. The bells were enchanted by Eriol to ward off bad luck. She'd only brought it because she had a feeling that she'd need all the luck she could get on this venture.
Once the bracelet was free Sakura pushed back her chair and stood, reaching for a last minute drink before sitting in on the various classes.
Unfortunately, she didn't look to see what sort of liquid resided inside the cup. If she had she would have seen an orangey-brown substance, with the consistency of a watery smoothie.
As it was, only her good manners prevented her from spitting her first mouthful out. Sakura began hacking and coughing, eyes watering.
Was that pumpkin juice? Sakura thought incredulously. Why in the world would one drink pumpkin juice? I wasn't even aware that pumpkins had juice!
Sakura sensed someone come up to her and was surprised when that person pounded her back in an effort to help her stop hacking.
Apparently she'd forgotten to cast the notice-me-not spell. Wonderful.
"You okay?" asked the girl.
"Fine," Sakura wheezed.
The girl looked embarrassed and bit her lip before saying, "I'm sorry, but I don't know your name. Mine is Ginny Weasley."
"Sa - um, nice to meet you," Sakura replied, stalling for time. Her given name wouldn't do. Why hadn't she thought of an alias?
Car? No, no, that's a kuruma. Kestrel . . . That's a bird, isn't it. Is it an English name?
"My name is . . ."
A common name. A common English name. I know them, I've heard so many. Why am I freezing in a tight situation? Okay.
"Alex. Alex . . . Smith," Sakura said brightly, barely remembering to shake hands instead of bowing.
"Short for Alexandra, I'm assuming? Or were your parents just cruel?" Ginny smiled to show that she was just joking.
"Short for Alexandra," Sakura replied, grateful for having been given a way out.
"Where are you from? I don't recognize your accent, but it's nice," Ginny remarked.
"I lived in Japan before I came to England," Sakura replied, which was more or less the truth. Ginny glanced down at her watch and suddenly became agitated. "I'd love to stay and talk, but I have Charms in ten minutes, and I'm sure you have class to get to as well."
"Yeah. See you later, maybe."
"See ya," Ginny said with a wave, nearly running out the door and down the hall to get to class on time.
"I can't make so many mistakes," Sakura muttered, casting the notice-me-not spell on herself.
"Especially if I live among some of the most powerful witches and wizards of the time. They're bound to notice something off eventually, and with the war going on, I've no doubt they'll be trigger-happy."
She brightened and trotted down the hall. Now she would finally get to see a real wizardry and witchcraft class. It was rather exciting.
It occurred to her that it would probably be easier had she arrived at the beginning of the school year so she knew what the classes were called and who taught them. Also, they would either be starting the basics or reviewing from the previous year. This wasn't going to be as easy as she thought... Well, not as easy as Eriol thought. Sakura thought this would be one of the hardest things she'd done, and that included taking the position of most powerful sorceress in the world. She paused on the way out, feeling that something was subtly different with the castle. She did a cursory check, barely brushing the web of spells and fates, and cursed at what she found. She'd left a piece of herself within the web, and it would take at least a year for it to fade. Syaoran and Eriol would kill her if they knew how careless she'd been.
She hoped it wouldn't come back to haunt her.
Sakura sighed. At least, starting tomorrow, she'd have Tomoyo's help. She would be a godsend.
"Orenda-san?" she called softly and a small spark of light flared into existence on her shoulder.
"What's the nearest class?"
The Rithlan bobbed down the hall and led her through the crowded halls. Sakura kept as best she could as she was jostled by elbows and bruised by swinging book bags.
"Ow, watch it!" Sakura snapped futilely, knowing that no one could notice her. She wondered which was better, attracting attention or being invisible with broken bones. She was saved from making a decision when she arrived in a stone classroom (not that every room wasn't stone). It was decorated with tapestries and several large cupboards were pushed against the wall. Most of the students were already in the classroom, taking out their textbooks. None of them took out any wands.
Maybe we were wrong, thought Sakura as she sat on the edge of the teacher's desk. Maybe they weren't as weak as we thought. Maybe they don't rely on wands alone.
Then the teacher arrived. She was rather tall and wore dark blue robes. Her eyes were hazel and her straight, bright red hair barely brushed her shoulder.
Sakura hopped off the desk and perched on an empty desk in the front row.
"Settle down," she commanded, "and turn to page 226. Miss Granger, please collect the homework."
A bushy-haired girl stood and made her rounds of the classroom. It was a small sized class as most classes go, Sakura noticed. There were perhaps only about 15 students, all of them around her age.
Sakura noticed what was written on the homework and groaned. The professor paused for a moment as if there was something troubling her, and then resumed teaching. Sakura glanced over at a textbook near her and confirmed her suspicions. This was a math class. A rather strange math class, but a math class nonetheless.
She sighed and exited the classroom. Even here, in a magic school, she couldn't escape it.
Sakura froze in the door of the next classroom Orenda led her to. All color drained from her face and she blinked rapidly. The ghost was still there, hovering in front of the class... teaching.
Sakura fought the urge to flee and forced herself to sit in an empty desk. She no longer quivered in sheer terror under the bed covers whenever the word 'ghost' was mentioned, but the fear had never really left her. She was surprised she hadn't seen any others; a place as old and powerful as Hogwarts would surely have its ghosts and fading memories.
It took her several minutes to calm down enough to listen to the professor. It helped if she didn't think of him as a ghost.
"...soon forgot the existence of magic, and wizards and witches were forced into hiding..."
Sakura yawned, already half asleep, fear forgotten. How could someone make something that should be very interesting so boring?!
"...witch trials followed soon after, killing innocents mistaken for witches..."
Her head nodded forward, sleep reaching for her...
SLAM!
"Ow," moaned Sakura, rubbing her head where it had hit the desk. Her concentration had slipped and her notice-me-not spell had dissolved, but amazingly no one stirred and the monotonous lecture never faltered.
Slipping the spell back into place, the sorceress left the classroom. The class could tell her the secrets of the universe for all she cared; she'd only go back is she became an insomniac.
Sakura sighed and decided to explore the Kitchen. She didn't seem to be having any luck with classes.
On her way she passed a room that caught her eye and cautiously stepped in. Her eyes widened in delight. A library! Maybe they had books on sorcerers? Whether they did or didn't, the books would be useful.
Sakura walked around the room, familiarizing herself with the sections. One bookshelf looked particularly unpleasant and a sign at the top read 'Restricted Section.'
She found a promising bookcase that contained what looked like wizard myths and tales. It stood to reason that if sorcerers didn't know or couldn't remember anything about wizards and witches, neither would witches and witches know anything about sorcerers.
Sakura bit her lip as her stomach growled. Perhaps she should come back later? It would still be there when she got back.
The Kitchen turned out to be relatively close to the library, and for that she was grateful.
Yesterday, as she made her way down the stairs, her knees had buckled rather than simply bent, and her muscles were still sore.
The kitchens were warm and brightly lit, with small, child-sized creatures with large floppy ears moving about everywhere, stirring this, baking that, carrying something else. It seemed a miracle that none crashed and nothing fell or broke.
The moment Sakura put a recognition spell in place of the other, she was nearly stampeded by the creatures. One of them, seemingly the spokesman, asked with a bow, "What would the Missus like?"
Sakura was overwhelmed by the subservient, eager to please attitudes of the crowd. "Um, perhaps a sandwich? Turkey?"

She was ushered over to a plush chair, and two of the creatures returned carrying a platter full of sandwiches, biscuits, and juice between them.

Sakura sweatdropped. "Ah... thanks."

"We is very happy to serve, Mistress," piped up one of them.

Sakura started at the word 'Mistress,' but calmed herself quickly. It was simply an honorific term. It didn't mean they knew what she was.

"Would the Mistress be wanting any more?" asked a particularly squeaky creature.

"This is plenty," she replied hurriedly. She hesitated and then continued. "I don't mean to be rude, but what are you?"

"We is house elves, Mistress, and my name is Dotty," replied one of the two who had served her with a bow. Sakura frowned. They were much different from elves - what she knew as the Fae - but perhaps they were a different breed or had just adopted the name.

Then she noticed the uniform that each house elf wore and was puzzled. It was some sort of cloth with a crest stamped on it. She sent out a tendril of her power and found that all of them were genuinely happy, so she shrugged and turned her attention to her lunch.

More of the house elves drifted off to continue their work as Sakura ate, but several always hovered near her, eager to please. She wasn't sure whether to be please or annoyed.

She managed to eat very little of the food and hoped it wouldn't hurt their feelings. Even after packing enough to last a day, the pile was hardly even dented.

And she still hadn't told the boys about her cell phone. Shrugging, she started out for the next class, only to discover that it was now their lunchtime. With a sigh, she waited, deciding to keep the recognition spell in place. People would be able to see her and think that they had seen her before. Their minds would supply the place. In theory, they should recognize her as a Hogwarts student, and she would provide her name when necessary, either by telling them or planting it in their minds.

"Eriol, this isn't going to work," said Syaoran with a scowl.

"What do you mean?"

The two boys were bent over a folder, seemingly staring at it blankly. Had anyone walked in on them, that person would have thought them mad. Thankfully not many people used the Room of Records. Not that they'd have seen the boys anyway.

"We've been working on this file for half an hour."

"We've almost dismantled the protection spells," Eriol replied. "We're down to the skeleton weave now."

"That's not the point," growled Syaoran. "It took us two and a half hours to get into Potter-san's and McGonagall-sensei's records. We may be getting faster on Dumbledore-sama's file, but at least we knew what we were looking for. Do you think they're going to let a Dark Lord's record just lie around, much less one that's in power now? Hell, we don't even know his true name!"

"Good point," said Eriol thoughtfully. "We'll just have to pick through someone's mind."

"You have no scruples, do you?" said Syaoran incredulously.

"Ummmmm. . . nnnnooo - waitwaitwait. Oh, never mind. No."

Syaoran rolled his eyes and gently slid his sorcery under a weak part in the protection wizardry. He winced as he twisted too soon and an alarm tried to break free of the barrier of silence. He was trained for fighting, not the disabling of foreign magic.

"Here," said Eriol, tossing him his cell phone. "Call Sakura and I'll finish this up. We didn't really get a chance to discuss things with her."

Syaoran stretched and grabbed the phone thankfully, punching in numbers with record speed. Eriol watched as his descendant's expectant look turned into a frown and he hung up.

It was Syaoran's turn to watch the other boy. A quick pull and careful unknotting resulted in a spell-free folder.

"What's wrong?" asked Eriol finally.

"Sakura's phone is out of order," Li replied shortly.
The blue-haired boy absently looked north, as if he could see the castle and its inhabitants. "I'll see what's wrong," he said at last, softly.
Syaoran could tell that he had come to a decision about something else as well, but didn't press for once.
"All right," he said, and ruffled through Albus Dumbledore's papers.
"Harry, hurry up! We're going to be late for Defense Against the Dark Arts!"
Sakura's attention immediately snapped over to a bushy brown-haired witch. A lean, messy-haired boy with glasses shouldered his way through the lunch crowd, and Sakura watched him through half-lidded eyes, examining his aura, reading his personality. "Harry Potter," she whispered.
The boy shivered and glanced over his shoulder before turning back to his friend. Sakura made her way over to where they stood, and then followed them through the hallways, only partly listening to their conversation. Most of her attention was taken up fighting through a sea of students.
"Cold?" asked Hermione, having seen Harry shiver.
He looked at her, but didn't really see her. "Yes," he said slowly, looking over his shoulder once more. "It's a little cold in here."
Hermione could see him retreating into himself, hiding from the world. Don't go, she wanted to plead. Don't leave us out again. All during 6th year he would retreat from the world, leaving only an emotionless shell behind, as if an android had taken his place. Back then Draco had been the only one able to bring him back with constant success, using harsh, biting words. Eventually the four of them had brought Harry back to his old self, but the scars were still there, and they were the kind that didn't leave a visible mark. Sirius' death had been hardest on Harry and it had taken some work to get him to believe that none of it was his fault.
Harry's eyes snapped back into focus, as if he'd heard her silent plea, and Hermione grinned in relief. "Hurry or we'll be late," she repeated.
"I almost feel sorry for Ron," he commented, matching Hermione's long strides, "stuck with that old bat while we get to teach snotty 2nd years Defense. Then I remember that we have twice the work to do when we correct their work."
"Harry, please. You were a snotty 2nd year yourself not so long ago. And why do you take Divination, anyway? It's a complete waste of time."
"It's also an easy class," he replied easily.
"You're incorrigible."
"Thank you."
"That wasn't a compliment."
"I know." Harry dodged Hermione's book bag and twisted to avoid running into another boy. He made a face upon returning to Hermione's side. "It's too bad Moody's back in time for me to make the second half of double Divination."
The witch rifled through the lesson plan. "A pop quiz and book work. Nothing new or strenuous today. I'll correct the quizzes and you can work on the Herbology essay we got this morning; I already finished mine."
Harry grumbled. "You're incorrigible," he said, mimicking her perfectly.
She swatted him. "Get going you. As of now I am a professor and should be treated as such."
"I'm a professor too," he protested. "At least for this next class."
She waved dismissively as they entered the classroom. "Yes, yes. Now help me take attendance." Hermione was actually the one to take attendance, while Harry passed out the quizzes. There was a collective groan from Slytherins and Gryffindors alike.
"No one told us about a quiz," muttered Brian Jameson.
"Hence the term 'pop quiz."
"Ten points from Slytherin, Miss Anders," said Harry mildly, wand suddenly out. "and next time you try to curse a student you will have detention with Mr. Filch. Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Bauch, for provoking her. Get back to work."
He ignored the grumbling and headed to the teacher's desk as Hermione patrolled the room. His attention wandered from the essay topic ('Advantages and Disadvantages of Wolf's Bane'), and he
found himself remembering Dumbledore's request in August. There had been a shortage of qualified Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, 'qualified' being a relative term (Gilderoy Lockhart came to mind, and he grimaced). Anyone brave enough to take the position was needed for the war, and a teacher's hours were never flexible. Moody and Lupin would teach when they could, but they needed another person who was not a member of the Order that would need to disappear unexpectedly. Harry had been shocked when he turned out to be the third professor, but he couldn't truly refuse. He had experience, was head of Dumbledore's Army, and had become much less prejudiced since acquiring Draco as a friend.

Professor McGonagall had suggested having Hermione help him. This Harry found much more plausible. She was the best student in school, advanced in knowledge, and overly organized. The two of them would make up work for classes they missed while teaching. At first Harry had been hesitant and inexperienced. He had quickly adapted to the situation, and they no longer questioned or tested him.

He had to adapt to survive. Those who didn't or couldn't adapt in these times died. Sometimes they died anyway. He couldn't bear to read the Daily Prophet anymore and he had come to despise Fudge, for what he did and didn't do.

His thoughts returned to Moody and Lupin. Harry hoped they were alive. Safe and well were foreign to him, but alive. . . . Alive was as good as it got.

"Harry," a voice murmured, and a hand tugged at his sleeve. He gazed unseeing at a girl's face before blinking and recognizing Hermione.

"Harry, Moody's back. We can go."

He looked down at his parchment and realized that it was filled. When had he finished the essay? He couldn't remember.

"Good afternoon," Harry greeted Moody quietly as the last of the students handed in their quizzes.

"Ger some sleep, Potter," the scarred man growled. "You look awful."

"No time for beauty sleep," Harry replied with a grin as he and Hermione left. "Doing your job and all."

The ex-Auror barked a laugh, scaring a timid Gryffindor girl on her way out the door.

"See you at dinner, 'Mione," Harry said as they parted ways.

"See you," she replied.

This was rather boring, Sakura thought glumly. The students were scribbling on an old-fashioned piece of parchment, the brown-haired witch/professor was patrolling the room, and Harry Potter was staring off into space. She couldn't leave since she was committed to trailing the boy with the scar.

Granted, it probably would have been more interesting if she knew what a Fernunculus Charm did. And what Gillyweed was. And why the two should never mix.

And why in the world was a student teaching anyway? She'd already read more minds than was decent, not that reading any mind was decent, mind you. She doubted the reason was near the surface of his mind, anyway. Abstract thoughts were harder to glean than names, say, that were almost always foremost in one's thoughts, no pun intended.

She wondered when class was over, and wandered around the room, examining books, and jars, strange objects that seemed to be haphazardly slapped together. One object looked almost like a remote control, except remotes did not have labels reading, "Stun" "Maim" "Kill" and "Extra Crispy." Remotes also didn't have a safety lock with enough spells to nearly blind her for several minutes with just one Glance.

That thing was definitely not people-friendly.

Sakura-sama.

Sakura jumped and nearly dropped a glass jar containing very disgusting, not to mention dangerous-looking, liquid.

Who. . . ?

She floated up to the north-facing window and crouched on the ledge. A small, black cat-like creature with dragonfly wings hovered in front of her.

"Spinel-san?" she whispered in surprise. "What are you doing here?"
"Master Eriol sent me when he couldn't reach you on your cell phone. He and Li-san were worried and sent me to look for you."
"Heh," said Sakura sheepishly. "I forgot to tell them that the phone . . . er. . . exploded."
Spinel blinked. "It exploded," he repeated.
"Yeah." She proffered her hand for his inspection. "The scars are nearly faded."
"How did it explode?"
"I was making a call, and I didn't realize that there would be. . ." she paused, trying to think of an appropriate term, ". . . magical interference."
"I suppose I should be heading back, if that's all?" said Spinel.
"You didn't fly the whole way here, did you?" Sakura asked horrified.
"Eriol-sama dropped me off about an hour's flight south of here. I thought I'd make it easy on him and get as close to England as I could before he checked on me."
"Are you sure you don't want to rest or something?" Sakura asked worriedly.
"I shall be fine," Spinel reassured her tonelessly. "I am not lazy like Kerberos."
There was nothing she could say to that, so she bid him farewell and turned just in time to see Potter-san leave. Sakura's Key glowed briefly and a card in her pocket answered its call.
"Fly," she murmured and sighed as she stretched large white wings. Soft, downy feathers fluttered gently in the movement. She looked out at the gray sky and saw Spinel disappear into the fog that rolled in.
Then she leapt from her perch and glided to the door, her wings disappearing at the last minute so she landed lightly on her feet. It created only a gentle breeze that barely disturbed the papers, and it had taken her weeks to learn.
Partway down the hall she met an aging wizard strolling in the opposite direction. She thought nothing of it until Harry said, "Hello, Headmaster."
"Good afternoon, Harry," he replied.
Sakura examined him. He looked rather eccentric, with his silvery beard tucked into his belt and blue and gold robes. His half moon spectacles were perched on a crooked nose and a certain sparkle in his bright eyes belied a happy nature. Albus Dumbledore was an awe-inspiring figure, but he appeared no more dangerous than her own grandfather.
A peak at his aura proved her false. It was a pulse of silver fire with over a century of experience behind it. He was the equivalent of a low- to mid-level sorcerer and it shook her.
Sakura realized that she truly had no idea what she was going up against. She'd had no idea a witch or wizard could be so powerful. And there was something about them that sapped power from a direct magical attack. Her shoulders hunched as if bowed under a great weight. Perhaps it would be harder to spy on him than she'd thought.
She had a deep sense of foreboding about this whole mission, but she simply took note of it and pressed on, following Harry Potter up several flights of stairs. She wouldn't abandon this world. Not now.
Spinel Sun sighed as he flew through the forest. Perhaps it would have been more comfortable to wait, but he'd had another reason to want to leave. Something was wrong in the forest. He sensed that not all was well, and he hoped to catch a glimpse of it, an ambition that was difficult in such thick fog.
Nothing seemed out of place, though Spinel would be the first to admit that he was more at home in a library than a forest. He sighed and circled once, lazily, glimpsing a red deer bound off in the distance. Perhaps his fear was simply paranoia.
He headed off south at a steady pace, so intent on getting home that he nearly missed the flicker at the corner of his eye.
Most likely another deer, thought the small creature, but decided to investigate anyway.
Suddenly shapes rose out of the mist and Spinel swooped behind the cover of a large tree. Slowly, carefully, he circled the clearing before speeding out of the forest and into the open air.
He rose as far as he dared before transforming into his true form, and trusted the sun to hide him, no matter how it hid behind the clouds and mist. He was a creature of the sun and it would help him.
Spinel's wings were unaccustomed to the speed at which he was flying, but he had to get close enough to call for his master before it was too late.

Sakura looked around in interest at the classroom she had just entered. Cushions were strewn over the floor near low wooden tables. On top of each table was a deck of cards. . . no, several decks, she saw at last, some old, some new, with many different designs on the back. The heat was stifling, but she welcomed it after the drafty halls of the school. A curtain hung in a corner of the room, and a window was located opposite.

She seated herself in front of the window near Harry and a red-haired, freckled boy, as a woman emerged from a room behind the curtain. She drifted to the front of the room in a whisper of cloth and clink of many bracelets, eyes magnified by her glasses.

"Mr. Potter, avoiding windows will save your life today, but there isn't much hope for the future," she said suddenly in a misty sort of voice.

What a way to instill confidence in a person, Sakura thought wryly as Harry simply rolled his eyes. If she'd been worried about how he might have taken such a prediction, she was reassured. Negative thoughts wouldn't help him at all during this war.

Two minutes into the class, Sakura suspected the woman was a fraud.

Five minutes into the class she was sure of it.

The teacher - professor - seemed to have no idea that the environment was rather conducive to divination. A relaxed atmosphere in which the diviner was expecting nothing would produce the best results. The teacher was such a dingbat, throwing out random "predictions," that Sakura, who always tried to see the good in a situation, was forced to admit that she was nearly as fake as fortune tellers could get.

Her attention kept wandering and she often found herself nodding off. Apparently she wasn't the only one having trouble focusing, Sakura noted when one somewhat chubby boy toppled over. She found herself staring out the window, dreamily noting that it seemed as if Hogwarts was a world unto itself, isolated, ending a few yards from the walls when features became lost in the fog. Again she was nearly lulled to sleep, and caught herself, jumping to open the window. The lock was stuck and it took some straining before it flew out with a bang.

"Sorry," she muttered sheepishly to the class. "I was having trouble focusing on the . . ." she looked at the cards in front of her with a frown, "lesson," she said finally, failing to remember what the cards were called.

"Back to work, class," said the professor - Trelawney, she gleaned from Harry's mind.

Sakura turned back to the window, not really caring whether she got in trouble or not. She couldn't stay awake, but she'd had enough sleep.

Something hovered at the edge of her senses, something very very wrong, and her thoughts were hazy, as if they came through a curtain of gauze.

"Of course," she whispered. "Windy."

The spirit flew from her card and a burst of air scattered the bespelled fog, blowing it back for the second it needed her to see to the edge of the forest.

Windy responded to her Mistress's unspoken wishes by blowing harder, steadier, beating back the fog that had brought sleep and unawareness with it.

"Death Eaters!" shrieked Sakura. "They're coming!"

The class murmured worriedly, tones sounding almost panicky.

"Nonsense," said Trelawny in her faux mysterious voice. "I would have sensed." She stopped talking abruptly at the glimpse of the dark figures. "You," she snapped, her vague expression gone. "Dean. Ring the alarm. NOW!" she bellowed when he hesitated in surprise.

"What are you waiting for??" she demanded of the rest of the class. "You know your positions. GO!!"

Sakura watched, impressed at how quickly they moved without running into each other or slowing anyone else down. Then it occurred to her that they'd probably done this many times before, and it saddened her. What must it feel like to live in the middle of war?

She staggered in the doorway when the alarm sounded, like a massive bell, ringing, ringing, giving her no relief from the sound. She reached the stairs and saw that they had begun moving
themselves. Apparently the castle helped its occupants in times of crisis. The students headed in one of two directions: down into the bowels of the castle, or out doors on the second floor that led outside. The smaller children went down, she noticed. The older ones went to defend the castle. She retreated silently back into the tower room as the flighty professor ran out, skirts bunched in one hand. Sakura needed a better vantage point, and the tower would provide it. She quickly ran to the window and threw it wide open, pulling herself up onto it. Don't look down, she chanted to herself as she carefully felt the roof of the tower. There was a ledge about an inch wide that she could grasp onto. As luck would have it, this was the only tower with a sloped, tiled roof and no walkway. Sakura bit her lip as she tried to decide what to do. If this was an all out battle, she'd need every bit of her magic. Her upper body strength wasn't enough that she could just pull herself up by her fingertips, though, and although the tiles created some purchase, it wasn't enough to really help her until she was actually on the roof. Perhaps there was a rope? The sounds of battle didn't register as she scoured the room for a rope, but her heart pounded with the need to hurry, to make a difference before people died. She couldn't stop a war by herself, but she'd do everything she could. Nothing. There was no help for it. She'd have to use her magic at least a bit. Sakura crouched on the window ledge, then sprang for the roof. Her fingers grasped the overhang and she brought herself partway up before she felt herself slipping. A small spurt of magic boosted her up onto her stomach, and she scrabbled in a very undignified manner to get her lower body up. Luckily there was a pole with a weathercock on top, and she grabbed onto it, breathing hard as she stared a long, long way down to the ground. "Right," she muttered faintly. "Calm down and find out what's happening." Then the protective barriers around the castle disappeared, and she 'eeped,' realizing that the Death Eaters could fight freely. "Don't worry Severus. I shall just have emergency barriers in place, that you know nothing about."

"Is this absolutely necessary, Albus?"
"Voldemort must not suspect that you are less than loyal to him. If you do not give his army access to the castle he will wonder why. I know that you did not know when he would be attacking. As you said, 'He does not tell everyone everything.'"
"... As you wish, Headmaster."
Just as quickly, two hastily constructed barriers were put up, one to prevent 'Apparation' and the other preventing entry into Hogwarts for certain witches and wizards. Sakura's eyes swept the field. Students and professors manned the wall surrounding the castle. Several hovered on long slender objects near the cliff and above the lake, watching to make sure no one came up from behind. Apparently, to those with magic, normal barriers weren't as formidable as they were for those without magic. A pinpoint of light appeared over her shoulder. "Orenda-san," she said in surprise and relief. "Would you mind doing me a favor? Could you watch out for Harry Potter?"
The Rithlan blinked out of existence and Sakura returned her attention to the battle. Men in black robes and creatures of dark, evil habitats and death surrounded the castle. A siege? She wondered. Can they hold out against a siege? Won't the students have an advantage? But the morale. What would happen to the morale of the wizarding world with their savior and children trapped in a stone castle? Their government would send reinforcements, yes, but there had to be weak points in the castle's defense, and then it would only be a matter of time before there would be slaughter and death and despair. She remembered what Eriol had told her. 'They're slowly losing ground to this Dark Lord. It's beginning to look hopeless for them, and from then on, it's a downward spiral. They need something to believe in, to hope for, with every fiber of their being.'
An explosion caught her attention. A hole appeared in the bottom of the wall near the gate.
"Hoshi no chikara o himeshi kagi yo! Shin no sugata o ware no mae ni shimese! Keiyoku no moto Sakura ga meijiru! Release!! Earthy!"
The wall rebuilt itself, trapping a Death Eater who was halfway through. He screamed as he was slowly crushed to death. The few who had made it behind the wall were quickly taken care of by one of the professors, but not before severely burning a 5th year girl. She was taken into the Castle to the Hospital Wing.

It was like the time she had been asked to be the target at her high school's volleyball practice. Holding several balls at a time, doing some quick shifting to catch the next one coming at her, emptying one hand just in time to catch another one coming at her. She had been quite adept at juggling volleyballs, but she could barely shift more than two or three spells at once, never mind casting or terminating more than one.

There had to be something more Sakura could do. Rebuilding broken walls, shielding students, throwing back enemies. It was all well and good, but it wasn't getting rid of the army. They just kept coming! More students were being taken off the wall, and she saw a tall, willowy professor crumple, her head hitting the stone before Sakura could react.

"Dammit!" Sakura raged, tears blinding her as a scream was abruptly cut off. "I need to end this. I have to." She needed something large and showy to scare them off. Her normal reserves were low, but there was her dark side she could draw from. Her personality wasn't quite balanced. She leaned more toward the brighter side of the yin-yang, and as a result, her darker energies gathered and could be used once every several years as a strong backup. It was what she needed now, and she began to plan.

Syaoran froze, dropping a sheaf of papers as a loud booming roar began faintly and grew in volume until he had to cover his ears. It brought him little relief. The sound was more felt than heard, thundering in his chest until he thought his ribs would break with the pressure. It slowly ebbed away and he staggered over to the room he had left Eriol in.

"What happened?" he asked the pale boy. "What was that? Why aren't the wizards reacting?"

"Spinel's telling me that there's danger, an emergency of some kind. It was a last minute idea when I created him, but this is the first time he's had to contact me this way. Only sorcerer's would feel it, which is why the wizards and witches in this building haven't reacted."

Syaoran blanched. "Is it Sakura? Is she in trouble?"

Eriol frowned. "Let's get to Hogwarts. Now. I'll grab Spinel on the way." He bit his lip. "Damn. I sent Ruby Moon on an errand. I hope we won't need her."

"Let's just go," growled Syaoran anxiously and disappeared a split second before Eriol did. Harry felt the sweat trickle down his back, but he ignored it, ignored everything but protecting his first true home. Everything was chaos, and if he didn't focus, if his attention was distracted for even a second, he could be taken down. Hex and counter-hex and curse and charm. Many of the students had little experience in a battle and some rather unorthodox means were used to defend themselves and others.

Some of the more creative ones protected those who needed time to cast a more powerful spell. Some students worked in groups, others alone. They used their talents, the quicker ones moving over the wall, giving help where it was needed, the more clever working with those with more magical potential.

It was working so far, but how long would their stamina last?

An explosion threw him to the floor, and he noticed, to his horror, a hole in the wall at ground level.

A group of seventh years, two professors, and a hippogrif hurried to dispatch those that made it through, but they would be overpowered. . .

Harry blinked in surprise as the wall rebuilt itself, and wondered who had worked such a complicated charm.

A crack and sharp pain brought him back to the battle with a cry. His humerus had been broken by a well-aimed curse. Determinedly, he turned back to the fracas. If it wasn't his wand-arm, then he wouldn't worry about it until later.

Harry saw Professor Sinistra crumple from the corner of his eye and signalled one of the medic
students for help.
He thought he heard his name called faintly from behind him. Ducking behind the stone barrier on
top of the wall, he turned to the courtyard.
A green light flared, and before he realized what was happening, a shooting star sped past his ear.
There was silence, and then an explosion of light, blinding him, and showing everything around
him in sharp relief.
"-ter! Potter!"
"Malfoy?" he asked dazedly.
"Potter, what the hell did you do?! Not that I'm complaining, but whatever spell you used stopped
the Killing Curse! No spell's supposed to stop the Killing Curse!"
"I didn't do a spell," Harry said, feeling doomed to being perpetually confused. "There was this
little spark of light that sped by me, and then light go boom."
"What are you, a five year old? I suppose I'll have to take your word for it." The blond scowled.
"Stupid idiots missed one of the Death Eaters that came through the wall. Back to work Potter.
This isn't over with yet." Draco disappeared, scuttling behind the barrier back to his position.
As Deputy Headmistress, Minerva was somewhat in tune with the castle, so she was the first to
notice when the barriers built into the very stone of the castle disappeared.
"Albus, I hope you know what you're doing," she murmured. Then she realized that he wasn't
anywhere to be seen. What was he doing now?
Two hastily set up barriers winked into existence, reassuring her as the group of Death Eaters and
magical beasts advanced on the castle.
Severus was, of course, nowhere to be seen in order to protect his secret allegiance.
A repulsive odor drifted toward her on the wind and she nearly gagged, overcome by her
powerful sense of smell. Tears streamed down her face and she thought she would suffocate.
"What is that?" asked Rachel, a sixth year Slytherin with a knack for healing spells, covering her
nose with her sleeve.
"H-har-pies," the Transfigurations Professor choked out.
Rachel was crouching down to avoid being hit. She reached into her healer's kit. "Here,
professor," she said, proffering a handkerchief.
"Th-thanks," the woman said, voice muffled. "Alert the defenders on this s-side of the wall. T-tell
them to watch the air."
"'kay," the Slytherin agreed and scrambled off.
Minerva doubled over, coughing as soon as she had left. The smell was getting worse and there
was only so much a handkerchief could do to block it.
She glanced skyward, and her pupils shifted to those of a cat. There, a whole flock of harpies to
her right. Minerva took careful aim and said quite calmly, "Incendio."
Three of them went up in balls of flame, thanks to the oil that coated their feathers. The others
screched, a sound like nails on a chalkboard, and scattered. Several others went up in flames as
well, and still others dropped like stones, stripped of feathers or weighed down by steadily
increasing gravity.
Minerva's nose and eyes cleared up and she managed to take a deep breath of smoky, magically
charged air. Next a chill ran through her and she shivered. Voices whispered in her head, growing
steadily louder and more powerful.
"Mother! Papa, don't. Papa, you're hurting her! Mommy!"
"Run, Min. Get away, hurry!"
Through the fog that clouded her brain she heard a quavery voice say, "Ex-pecto P-patronum."
The voices receded to a whisper and she saw a tiny whip of silver out of the corner of her eye.
"Come on, Longbottom! You've done this in D.A. On three."
Happy memories, thought Minerva.
"One," said Draco, flinching as a spell shot by his ear.
"Two." Neville mouthed the word with the Slytherin.
"Three!"
"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"
To everyone's mutual surprise, four voices shouted the incantation, resulting in a burst of blinding light similar to the one that had stopped the Killing Curse aimed at Harry. When they could see again, four white animals were haranguing the Dementors, pushing them back away from the castle. A whispy hawk dove at them from the air and despite everything, Neville was grinning, watching his creation. Minerva's lioness was almost too bright to look at as it herded the group of Dementors back with the help of Draco's cobra. Professor McGonagall's mouth quirked when she saw the puffin waddling after them and turned to see whose Patronus that was.

"Not exactly the dignified Patronus of a Seer," Sybil Trelawny commented with a frown as Neville and Draco stood open-mouthed, staring at her. "I wasn't aware that you could produce a Patronus, Sybil," said Minerva. "A Seer," said Trelawny, once more adopting her airy tone of voice, "does not reveal all she knows for fear of Fate's consequences."

This brought Neville and Draco out of their stupor and all of them turned back to the battle in time to see a stag Patronus flare into being off in the distance with Alice Tunnerman's large dog Patronus. A sudden shrill scream caught her attention and she watched student tumble off the wall in horror. "Mobilicorpus!" bellowed another student, barely in time to stop her impact. Minerva quickly chanted a powerful shield spell as the Death Eater's aimed at the two. Their spells rebounded and hit wizards, witches, and Dark creatures near the spellcasters.

Please God, she thought desperately. Let them give up. I'm not sure how much more we can take. Sakura knew that direct attack spells wouldn't work well on wizards and witches, though she had no idea why. Their main weak point was their wands. They depended on the wands, and if she destroyed them, they would be vulnerable. Something flashy would be best, and flashy spells took little power to cast. Once she had planned out what she needed, she began the casting of her spell, drawing on the strength of her darker side.

"Fly," she called, twirling her staff. Black wings materialized on her back and everything about her seemed tinted a darker shade. She called upon the shadows, called them to her, and they came. A black aura seemed to crackle around her, and as she took flight, her shadow kept pace on the ground. But it wasn't her shadow. The darkness pulsed, seeming to reach and grow, or shrink. Shouts and screams let Sakura know that the ones on the ground and wall had seen her, but she was detached from it all, face frozen into a blank mask.

The moment she was above the field the snap of wands breaking announced her loyalty. Blackness rolled before her and behind her, and every Death Eater it touched found themselves holding broken wood. After the first moment of shock, the army tried to attack her with spells, but they fizzled out the moment they touched her. The few holding bows and poisoned arrows shot at her, but the arrows simply veered away at the last moment to strike someone - or something - in the crowd. Sakura cleared a large swath of the army before disappearing into the trees. Once out of sight she alighted on a sturdy branch and put her hands on her head, breathing heavily. It had taken more out of her than she'd thought it would.

A howl, crystal clear, seemed to hang in the air long after the creature had fallen silent. Syaoran, she recognized emotionlessly. I wonder what he's doing here? There was a moment of complete silence and then, as Sakura peeked at the field, certain people seemed to go crazy, howling and yipping and fleeing. She looked at them with her Sight and saw the features of a wolf overlapping those of the human. Werewolves, she realized. Their wolf nature had overloaded their human side at Syaoran's howl. They subconsciously recognized Syaoran as an alpha male, someone too powerful for them to battle, and so they had submitted to his command and fled. Harry suddenly found Ron and Ginny at his elbow.
"What's going on?" Ginny whispered fearfully. "Who - or what - was that?"
"I don't know," Harry replied.
"No one's seen Dumbledore at all," Ron said. "It looks like that thing was on our side; look what she did to You-Know-Who's army. But this really doesn't look good, mate."
"Voldemort's not here, though. I would have felt the danger before they'd surprised us if he was." A thought occurred to Harry. "Is everyone okay?"
"That Anderson guy is in critical condition. His skin was melting off before we got him to Madam Pomfrey. He's the worst case, though, as far as I know," Ginny replied.
"What's -"
Ron was cut off by a long howl that raised goosebumps on their arms.
"Professor, what's wrong?" asked Hermione worriedly.
The moment the howl had rung over the battlefield he had tensed and taken a step backward, hands clenched into fists. Sweat beaded his brow and she was afraid he was going to bite through his lower lip. An unearthly moan reverberated deep in his throat. Hermione wasn't sure if she should keep her eyes on him or on the field.
Hermione wasn't sure if he was talking about himself or the creature that had caused the werewolves in the Dark army to flee.
"He wants me. . . to run. I can't. . ." Lupin's lips pulled back in a feral scowl, bearing his teeth.
"Professor?" asked Hermione, frightened. There was still a week to go before the full moon. He shouldn't be acting like this.
"I have to. . ." His voice was strained and his body was trembling.
"Wait," she said, an idea occurring to her. She quickly cast several different calming charms over him as well as an advanced lethargy spell.
Remus' trembling ceased and he relaxed, wincing as he saw the crescent marks of his nails on his palm. "Thank you," he said shakily. "25 points to Gryffindor."
A pale grey wolf fell upon the army in front of the main double doors, every bite or swipe of claws deliberate. Soon his muzzle and paws were red with blood. The only ones to see his large golden eyes were those who died with that knowledge, with the knowledge that an intelligent being was taking his revenge upon them.
No one noticed when the raven first showed up, but he quickly drew attention. His black feathers had a bluish sheen and his claws and beak were wicked sharp as he dove at heads and eyes. "The Morrigan!" some of the more superstitious people screamed, and many broke down and Apparated as they ran from the chaos.
"Retreat!" a voice bellowed and the creatures fled to the forest as the Death Eaters Disapparated. "The Morrigan," Eriol muttered huffily as he appeared next to Sakura. "Honestly. Do I look like a female to you?"
Sakura allowed her wings to fade and released her Dark self as Syaoran lurched to the base of the tree, face and hands streaked with blood. "Do you really want me to answer that?" he asked weakly before his knees buckled and his leaned over to vomit painfully, his heaves wracking his slender body, hair plastered to his head. Sakura, now that she was back to normal and weak, felt nauseous herself.
She allowed herself to hang from the branch before dropping next to Syaoran. He was still heaving even though nothing was coming up.
"Syao-kun," Sakura crooned, holding him as he calmed down. "Syao-kun, aishiteru. Zettai daijoubu dayou." Everything will be all right. But she wasn't sure if it would.
"I've never killed anyone like that. I've never killed anyone before," Syaoran said finally, wishing he had something to wash the taste of vomit out of his mouth. "How did you know what was happening?" Sakura asked finally once she was sure Syaoran was okay.
"Spinel Sun saw them on his way back to England and managed to contact me," Eriol replied somberly, as he tried not to think about what he'd just done on the battlefield. "Right now he's
asleep in my mansion. He's exhausted from flying so far and contacting me."
"And Ruby Moon's leaving him alone?" Sakura asked disbelievingly.
"Actually, she's not home right now. She's running an errand for me, and I'm not sure when she'll
be back."
"What's this errand?" Syaoran asked suspiciously. It wasn't his nature to linger over anything for
too long, even killing.
"She's just looking for a group of people," Eriol replied evasively, and Sakura and Syaoran knew
they wouldn't be getting anymore out of him.
"I'd better get back to the school before the barriers go back up," Sakura said with a sigh. She
stepped in the direction of the castle before pausing and turning back to them.
"This can't happen again," Sakura said quietly. "We need to know what this Dark Lord is doing."
"Ruby Moon is looking for the meeting places of Death Eaters in Scotland and England," Eriol
said finally. "One of us can spy on this Voldemort, and Tomoyo can help the other at the
Ministry."
Sakura sighed. "There goes my partner."
"I guess you could still have her, it'll just take longer to find the papers we need," said Eriol.
"No, that's okay. She'll probably be safer there, anyway. Ja mata."
"Ja mata," Syaoran and Eriol echoed.
"Albus?" Minerva called out softly as she opened the door to his office. "Are you here?"
Either Albus or Severus had restored the normal barriers, but she hadn't seen either of them,
which, for Severus, was normal, given his isolated tendencies. However, it was very unusual for
Albus not to be in the thick of things.
"Incendio," she said, pointing her wand at the coals in the fireplace. They immediately flared up
and she blinked as her eyes adjusted to light after the dim gloom.
"Albus?" she asked, walking over to the armchair in front of the fire. She gasped. "Albus!"
The great wizard was slumped over in his seat, wand fallen to the ground, burns lacerating what
she could see of his skin. For one heart-stopping moment she thought he was dead, until she
noticed the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest.
Minerva wanted to rush to his side, but she was brought up short by an invisible wall. "What-?
Then she was the lines and runes drawn on the floor. A Great Ritual, she recognized with horror.
But what was it for?
Most of the runes were too complicated for her to decipher, but she knew one of the ones that kept
repeating itself was shield, and another power. Castle was in the section that marked the
restrictions, and that one that almost looked like the kanji for ear meant communication. This one -
Apparition? Part of that rune looked familiar. The power source looked strange. It was like two
beings had been combined into one.
She shook her head. What was she doing? Albus could have died, could still die! She tried to get
to the fireplace so she could contact Poppy, but the shield blocked too much. It had been sheer
dumb luck that her spell had gotten to the fireplace.
Minerva could feel her heart racing and she firmly clamped down on her panic as she raced out
the door and down the steps, becoming a cat in mid-bound. Poppy. She had to find Poppy.
But how would Poppy be able to get past the shield to help Albus?
She abruptly changed direction and swerved around a corner, jumping onto the bookbag of a
student to get by her without running into her.
"Was that Professor McGonagall?" asked Hannah in astonishment.
"Remus!" she howled in Cat as she sprinted into his office.
"Minerva?" he asked in surprise.
"What?" asked the dour man next to him.
"Severus!" she exclaimed as she transformed back into herself. "What are you doing here? Never
mind, thank God the two of you are here!"
They stared in astonished, never having seen the stern Professor McGonagall so flustered or
panicked.
"It's Albus. He's gone and done a Great Ritual, and there's a barrier, and I can't get to him! You
two are knowledgeable on the subject are you not? Hurry!"
"Is he all right?" asked Remus as they sprinted out of the room.
"As far as I could tell. You two go up to his office and find a way to get past the barrier. I'll get Poppy."

Few students had ever seen Professor McGonagall run. No one could believe quite how fast she could go.
"Out of the way," she snapped at a group of students mingling in the hallway. Needless to say, they scattered.
"Poppy!" she called as she burst into the Infirmary.
"Quiet," hissed the medi-witch. "These students need their rest if they're going to heal."
"Come with me," said Minerva quietly. "There's been an emergency."
"Who is it, and what's wrong?" asked Madam Pomfrey, gathering her medic bag.
"I'm not sure what's wrong." She leaned in close and murmured, "It's Albus," not wanting to panic the students or spread rumors.

Poppy paled. "Can we Floo?"
"I don't know. Try to the fireplace in the empty old Arithmancy classroom next door," said Minerva.

Both disappeared into the fire almost immediately, and then rushed to the Headmaster's office.
"We just got it," said Remus, face gaunt and paler than usual. Severus looked much the same. "It doesn't matter where you step, the circle's broken."

Poppy Pomfrey cast several diagnostic spells, and then selected several potions from her bag.
"Help me get this into him," she ordered Minerva.
"What's wrong with him?" she asked, complying.
"Mostly it's extreme exhaustion. His heart is weak, but this potion should strengthen it right away. If you'd waited even an hour more, his heart might not have recovered. He's not as young as he used to be," Poppy announced.
"None of us are," murmured Minerva.

Severus looked over at Lupin. "There's nothing I can do for you. You were simply too weak to resist the call of this. . . alpha male," he sneered. "Do not bother me over such trivial matters."
"So you think," he retorted. "I've been told my hair would spontaneously combust should I so much as compliment anyone not in Slytherin."
"You've been told or overheard?" asked Remus with a raised eyebrow.
"It makes no difference," he scowled.
"I'm taking the Headmaster to the Infirmary so I can keep an eye on him, but he should be fine after some rest," Poppy said.
"Is rest the only cure you believe in, woman?" Severus demanded.
"Enough," Minerva cut in. "One of you find a house elf to clean up this mess."
"I'll go," Remus volunteered and slipped out.
"Severus, you can go reassure the student body."
"Lucky me," he grumbled and stalked out.
"Do you need help, Poppy?" she asked the nurse.
"Could you cast an Invisibility Spell? I don't want to create a panic if they see him incapacitated." Minerva complied, and then the nurse used her wand to lift him.

A Great Ritual? thought Sakura, examining the remnants of the casting. It was one of the simpler ones she knew, powering a large, strong shield with the caster's own energy. It shouldn't have been a problem for someone of the Headmaster's skill. From what she could tell, the teachers thought him lucky to escape as he had. He shouldn't be more than tired even at his age. Something strange was going on here.
Haunted

Chapter Summary

What is unseen is not necessarily unknown.
-Wendelessen

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long
Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom
For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.
-T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

Classes were cancelled for the rest of the day. Professors and 7th year volunteers were called to
the Infirmary to care for the wounded. The moment it was safe, William Anderson was sent to St.
Mungo's in critical condition. He died two hours later at 7:18 in the evening and Hogwarts once
more went into mourning.

Madam Pomfrey's store of burn ointment and Pepper Up potion ran low and Severus Snape was
forced to dip into his own private storeroom. Empty classrooms were cleaned thoroughly by house
eelves before being used to house more of the wounded.

Ministry Aurors arrived just as Harry Potter's arm was being mended, and searched the grounds
for any sign of Death Eaters or the beings that had appeared to drive them away. Students and
professors alike were questioned before stumbling off to bed where they would sleep fitfully, if at
all. The few in possession of Dreamless Sleep potions quickly downed it and sank into the
welcome arms of sleep and the momentary forgetfulness brought with it.

And throughout it all, Albus Dumbledore slept, chest rising and falling rhythmically. When a
patient or volunteer was finally released, they bowed their heads once in his direction before
parting, thankful that he was not dead and wishing for him to resume his guardianship of the
school.
Hermione was one of the last to leave, in the darkness of the night, and she had only left at
Madam Pomfrey's insistence. Harry was recovering from a shattered humerus and Ron had
sustained a nasty head injury right after the Morrigan had appeared.
She tread softly through the halls of Hogwarts, her progress lit only by the moon. She didn't feel
like lighting her wand, and as Head Girl, she had no fear of getting caught, though she doubted
anyone but Filch and Mrs. Norris would be patrolling tonight. Hermione hated war; hated it with a
passion. She hated Voldemort and his followers so much sometimes, that she wondered if there
was something wrong with her. Did Harry feel like this? Did Ron? Draco, she knew, had a large
capacity for hate, and with good reason.
But he had a reason. He knew evil, knew its face, had seen it in the face and actions of his father
and friends. Harry had a reason. Evil had destroyed the only true family that had ever loved him.
Something was wrong in the world when a person like Sirius could become condemned and die,
yet the traitor, the rat, lived and thrived. It was small comfort that Sirius' name was finally cleared
when Wormtail stepped out into the open.
Hermione stopped and took a deep breath, trying to calm down and cease the trembling of her
hands.
Suddenly a hand covered her mouth and an arm encircled her waist, trapping her hands against
her sides as she was jerked into a shadowed alcove. She flailed wildly and was about to lash out
with her foot when a familiar voice whispered next to her ear, warm breath tickling her cheek.
"Hermione, it's me."
The witch froze and the hand was removed from her mouth. "Professor Lupin?" she breathed.
"Shh. Something's coming, something that doesn't belong."
His eyes were shadowed, but Hermione could feel how tense he was as her slender body was
pressed to him. If he was a wolf, she imagined he'd be growling, teeth bared, much like he had
been when the alpha male had howled for the werewolves to flee or die.
In the absolute silence Hermione could hear quiet footsteps coming toward them. Perhaps it was
her imagination, but something told her that whoever was coming was out of place, maybe too
real or not real enough.
She blinked and shook her head slightly. That didn't make sense. But if there was one thing her
time with Ron and Harry had taught her, it was that not all things were completely logical.
They saw the light first, steadily becoming brighter, and Hermione blinked rapidly in an effort to
get her eyes to adjust quickly. Lupin's grip around her loosened and they both reached for their
wands.
A figure walked into view, a glowing glass ball held in one hand. The two waited as the person
passed by the alcove.
"Stop," Remus ordered as he stepped into the middle of the hallway.
The person whirled around and Hermione, squinting, managed to make out the face of a girl. A
pair of emerald eyes were wide and her lips were parted in surprise. Brown hair framed her face
and time seemed to freeze.
Then the light went out and they were left blind in the darkness. "Lumos," Hermione and
Professor Lupin said instantly, but the hallway was empty, as if the girl had never been there.
"Accio Invisibility Cloak," said Hermione. No one could have disappeared that quickly unless
they were invisible.
But no cloak sped at her, no girl was revealed.
"Revalis persona," Remus Lupin chanted after a moment. Any living thing in the hallway would
have begun to glow, but only Hermione and himself were affected.
"Who was that?" Hermione asked when it became clear that they wouldn't find anything.
"Most likely we just terrified a student who was on her way to her Common Room," he replied,
but Hermione could tell that he didn't believe it any more than she did. "Good night, Hermione."
"Good night, Professor," she replied and absently headed to Gryffindor Tower, her mind going
through all the possibilities and mystery surrounding what they had seen.
Sakura sighed in relief. That had been close. The magic of the school interfered with her ability to
sense auras, and she only used her Sight when she had to or she'd be blinded by the magic
residing in the castle.
She scowled, immediately angry with herself. Just because she was tired and her abilities were
limited didn't mean that could relax or let down her guard. There were competent witches and
wizards all over the castle. One misstep and her progress, according to Eriol, would be even more
difficult, her movements watched and limited. She would be distrusted and would be regarded
with awe or even fear.
The last spell had caught her unawares. Apparently Hermione and the professor were used to
people who were invisible, yet present. At least she had discovered the man's name: Remus
Lupin.
There was something strange about him. Sakura grudgingly postponed her bath and followed him,
trying to figure out what it was about him that called to her. She rarely felt the pull of someone
who wasn't a sorcerer that needed help only she could give. She wondered what was so
desperately wrong with him.
He turned around again for the fourth time. Sakura was beginning to wonder if he could sense her.
Finally he stood before a statue of a wizard with a long beard, staff, and old-fashioned robes.
Wait a minute, Sakura thought as Remus murmured something under his breath. That's not a
statue of a wizard. That's Merlin!
She was forced to abandon her train of thought as Remus stepped through the door that had
appeared in the wall when the statue moved. Sakura had to move quickly before the door
disappeared.
Apparently these were his rooms. She followed him through the study, examining his features. His
face was lined, hair streaked prematurely gray. His shoulders slumped wearily and he yawned as
he ran his hand through his hair. There wasn't anything too unusual until she studied him with the
Sight. Then the transparent features of a wolf overlaid his own.
A werewolf, she recognized. No wonder he called to her. But if she was to help him, she'd need
to speak with him, and that would mean blowing her cover. Perhaps she could trade with him. Her
help for his knowledge of the wizarding world.
But that still didn't solve the problem of whether she could trust him to keep the secret. Or if she
should. But there was no time to contact Eriol and Syaoran now.
She trailed him into the bedroom. It was a very homey room with a worn trunk at the foot of the
bed, an oak chest of drawers, a bookcase overflowing with books, and moving pictures hanging
on the wall. Sakura still couldn't get used to how animated pictures were in the wizarding world.
She had trouble remembering to perform magic away from the prying eyes of the portraits hung all
over the school.
As soon as Remus turned his back Sakura shed her invisibility and sat on the bed, bouncing a bit
with unconfined nervousness, praying to God that this wasn't a mistake. She blushed when she
realized that he had removed his robe and had begun to take off his shirt.
"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she cautioned.
The effect her voice had on him was instantaneous. He jerked the hem of his shirt down so hard
she was surprised it didn't tear, and spun around to face her, wand at ready. No doubt, had she
been standing, it would have been aimed at her torso, the easiest target. As it was, it pointed
somewhere between her eyes.
She opted for the kitsune Akai's approach to begin with, something overly cheerful to catch him
off-guard, and keep him there.
"Hello," she said cheerfully. "You really shouldn't point weapons at other people's heads. It's
rather dangerous, you know."
"You were in the hallway," he said, wand not wavering.
"Hai - I mean yes. I'm flattered that you recognize me."
"Who are you? What do you want?" he demanded harshly. Sakura was surprised at his tone of
voice. He seemed like such a gentle, serene man.
"How rude of me, I should have introduced myself. My name is Sakura Kinomoto." She thought about standing up and bowing, but decided that she'd rather not give him a reason to use his wizardry. Instead she gave him a little bow from a sitting position. "I simply wanted to get to know you better."
"You are Japanese?" he asked.
"How did you guess?"
"I was in Japan for a few months before the war, studying the tanuki." He lowered his wand a bit and sat down on a chair, watching her for any sign of a threat. The sense of wrongness pervaded the air.
"Really?" she said delighted. "I stayed among the kitsune for a while. I've been told that some of their bad habits rubbed off on me. It's rather useful, though, for spying and being interrogated." She smiled, proud that she'd actually remembered that complicated English word.
"Why are you here?"
Sakura sighed and abandoned her carefree, mischievous approach. "Something in you called for me, and I couldn't figure out what it was. Then I saw that you were a werewolf, and I realized what it was that you needed me for. I can alter the curse, make it more of a blessing than a burden. But I need to see if it would upset what I'm doing too much, if I should wait until later." Tears threatened when she saw the desperate, hopeful look he couldn't hide. But she had to stay firm. She could help him immediately, but it might be more prudent to wait until her spying was no longer required. Sakura was determined to do it, she just had to figure out when.
"Why should I trust you?" he asked in a strained voice.
"You shouldn't," she replied simply. "I wouldn't expect you to. You're in the middle of a wizard war without truly knowing who is friend and who is the enemy."
"We've been betrayed," Remus acknowledged. "Several times, in this rise to power and the last."
"There was one before this one?" Sakura asked, startled.
"Yes. How could you not know? You aren't a Muggle."
"Not exactly, no," she agreed. "What do you know of sorcerers?"
"It's a title given to those that have distinguished themselves in some way against evil," he replied confused at this apparently random change of topics.
Sakura blinked. "Okaaayyy. We're not talking about the same type of sorcerer. Do you know a different definition?"
"There are sorcerers in our myths," Remus began, uncertain of where this would lead him. "They are powerful beings and shouldn't be trusted." He wondered at the pain he saw in the girl's - Sakura's - expression at his words, and hesitated before continuing. "They are solitary people, preferring to avoid contact with any wizard or witch. According to legend, there is only one spell that will affect them, but I can't remember what the words were, or what it did. The spell has been tested by researchers several times, but it appears to be a fluke."
"Would a witch or wizard trust a sorcerer?" Sakura asked quietly.
"It's doubtful. Very few of the stories show them in a good light."
"Even if she helped them?"
Remus noticed the change from 'sorcerer' to 'she,' and examined the girl before him closely.
"Perhaps especially if she helped him. Why do you ask?"
Sakura stood abruptly and Remus immediately trained his wand on her. "Because I," she said softly, as a card appeared in her hand, "am a sorceress."
The card began to glow and Remus' eyes widened in shock. "Incarcerous," he said quickly, and rope flew out of his wand toward the girl, but instead of binding her, they fell limply to the ground.
"Illusion. Show him what I looked like during the battle."
Remus watched suspiciously as a picture began to take place in the air. Ordinarily he would have gone to Dumbledore immediately, but Dumbledore had yet to recover from the ritual. He couldn't decide if he should flee, but she hadn't threatened him at all, only talked with him and restored a tiny spark of hope.
The picture solidified into the mirror image of Sakura with a few subtle differences. Perhaps it was
the lighting of the room, but the illusion-Sakura looked as if she was tinted darker, and black wings protruded from her back. "You were the one to stop the battle," he breathed, lowering his wand. "And the wolf and the raven. . . ?"
"Were friends," she said.
"Sorcerers?"
Sakura nodded.
"I had wondered," he said softly. "The wolf inside me nearly took over, and would have if not for Hermione Granger's quick thinking. I know that only dire wolves would have that effect on werewolves, and they are extinct."
"So, this Hermione Granger is the one you were with in that alcove earlier?" Sakura asked innocently.
Remus could feel himself flushing at the implication.
"Kawaii!!" Sakura squealed delightedly. Upon seeing his confused expression, she elaborated. "It's my best friend's favorite phrase. Means 'cute.'"
"Which one was she?"
Sakura looked rather perplexed, a common theme for the night.
"Was she the wolf or the crow?"
"It was a raven, and she wasn't either of those. I believe you would call her a Muggle," Sakura replied.
Remus shook his head. Would the wonders never cease. Then he remembered her question and fought to keep from blushing again. "In answer to your question, yes, she was with me in the alcove," he said stiffly. "The wolf could sense you coming and I didn't want a student to be hurt."
"A student? She was teaching a class with Harry Potter when I saw her."
"No one could be found for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, so those two take over when both Alastor Moody and myself are gone," Remus replied.
"Doing what?" Sakura asked curiously.
"I can't tell you. I will not betray Albus' trust in me," Remus told her warningly. To his surprise she smiled at him.
"Good. There is hope for your world if trust in Albus Dumbledore can keep the Light together and strong. I can already tell that I will have trouble hiding from him, even in such a large place as this."
"But I must tell him. He needs to know about your presence and willingness to help, as well as your two friends," Remus said in surprise.
Sakura shook her head regretfully. "I will have to make you forget. Even if you would lie for me there is a great possibility that my secret will be found out. I am sorry."
"Then why did you come to me?" he asked, perplexed.
"To give you hope. In about a week, with the war going on, I can modify your curse so that you can transform at will without the pain. You will no longer be governed by the moon."
"I will be an Animagus?" he asked, not quite daring to believe her. It was too good to be true.
"A what?" Sakura asked blankly.
"A wizard able to change into an animal at will."
"Only one animal?" Sorcerers could choose any number of animals, though they usually limited it to a handful. She shrugged. Learn something new about wizards every day. "Yes, that sounds right. Minerva McGonagall is an Animagus, then?"
"Yes," he acknowledged. "How do you know her?"
Sakura grinned wryly. "She was my cat for a while." Then she was gone.
Remus Lupin was left with an inexplicable sense of loss, tempered by hope he had buried at Sirius' death.
"I feel like I've forgotten something," he said aloud.
Sakura slid down the wall and put her head in her hands, as much from exhaustion as sorrow for Remus Lupin's plight. "That was too much," she gasped, her breath burning her throat as she panted. "I need sleep."
But first she had to wash away the dirt and sweat from her skin, and scrub away the memories of blood and death. "Orenda-san?" she asked after gaining some control of her breathing. Sakura waited, but no spark appeared. "Orenda-san?" she tried again with the same result. She was quite worried now, but she didn't have the energy to go look for the Rithlan.

It took some time, but Sakura managed to get to her feet and stumbled in a drunken manner down the hall. Her luck was still with her, as it wasn't long until she met a 6th year.

"Could you direct me to the baths?" Sakura asked the girl wearily. Rachel gave her a strange look. "How could you not know...?" She blinked. "They're just up those stairs and to the left. When you get to the painting of the sea, knock on the bottom right corner of the frame. Just go straight to the end of that hall and the password is unity." Perhaps it was her imagination, but the girl looked even sicker than she had when she asked the question. "Look, have you seen Madam Pomfrey? You're in bad shape."

Sakura forced a smile on her face. "I'm just exhausted, is all. But I really need a bath."

Rachel nodded and continued on her way. Sakura sighed in relief. Her whole body was trembling from that last spell, but she couldn't have anyone become suspicious of her. Not now, maybe not ever.

Sakura nearly collapsed several times on her way up the stairs. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so drained. She gulped at the air as she paused before the painting. Her knock was very weak, but apparently it qualified as the painting slid to the side.

Just a few more yards, Sakura told herself as she walked. Then she found herself in front of a panel of wood.

"Unity," she whispered through dry lips.

A doorknob appeared and she stepped through the door into a room containing a row of stalls, all reading 'unoccupied.'

Sakura felt like crying. This was it? A tiny stall to take a shower in? Not even a tub? Disheartened, she opened the door, and blinked. Instead of a dingy stall, she found herself staring at a well-lit room about twice as big as her own bathroom with a square tub, twice as long as her own height. Fluffy white towels were lined on a rack on the wall to her height. Sakura closed and locked the door before taking off her clothes and studying the knobs on the tub. She recognized the knobs for hot and cold, and felt the water as she turned them until she had the temperature she wanted. Three knobs had a picture of different sized bubbles, and she turned the smaller one. Immediately bubbles poured out with the water and Sakura smiled. A bubble bath! That was good enough for now; she'd see what the other knobs did some other time.

She closed her eyes and relaxed as she sank into the water. That felt nice... Sakura caught herself nodding off several times in the course of her bath. Once she was sure all of the suds were out of her hair, and her skin was scrubbed until it was raw, she clambered out of the tub, her muscles feeling like noodles.

The towels felt nice against her skin, and they immediately soaked up the water without becoming soaked themselves. And Sakura could have been wrong, but she thought they kept her warm as she towelled herself off.

She went to put on her clothes before she realized that she hadn't thought to bring any clean clothes. Sakura bit her lip as tears filled her eyes. Her exhaustion was making her emotional. Then she noticed a closet and opened it for lack of anything better to do. Inside was a bathrobe and slippers. When she took off the towel she had wrapped around her body, she discovered that both the robe and slippers were exactly her size.

Sakura tied the belt securely around her waist, bundled up her clothes and left the room. If she remembered correctly, the third floor was down two flights of stairs. Gripping the rail tightly, she made her way down and, as luck would have it, recognized where she was and how to get back to her room. The portraits she passed were all sound asleep and Sakura took care not to wake them up. She passed no one and heard nothing. The castle was asleep, and she entered her room and changed into pajamas. She'd return the bathrobe and slippers in the afternoon. After a day like this, Sakura seriously doubted that she would be up before
lunchtime.

She was barely under the blankets before she lost all awareness of the world around her. Albus Dumbledore slowly became conscious of the world around him. His eyes felt gritty with sleep, and he realized that he had misplaced his spectacles. He shifted onto his left side and discovered them on the table next to his bed. Then he frowned and looked around as he reached for his spectacles. Why was he in the Infirmary?

Albus pushed himself up into a sitting position, and then swung his legs to the side. He was relieved to see that he still had his robes on. He tried to remember what had happened as he slipped into his footwear. There were no aches and pains. As far as he could tell, he was just tired.

It was only when he took one last look around the room that he noticed the tabby cat curled up on a chair. It must be her planning period. Then the events of the previous evening came back to him. The ritual, the ruins and circles painstakingly drawn on the floor. Setting up the two shields, one an anti-Apparition shield, the other to scramble any communication or calls for backup. He must have passed out from the effort. Albus winced at the thought of what Minerva would do when she caught him awake. He quietly slipped out through the curtain surrounding the bed and had almost managed to escape out the door when a woman said warningly, "Headmaster."

He cringed inwardly as he turned and smiled placidly at Poppy. "Yes, Poppy?"

"Don't 'yes, Poppy' me," she snapped. "You performed a Great Ritual less than 24 hours ago. Back in bed."

Albus looked around the half full Infirmary. "I'm afraid I can't laze about all day. There is work to be done and I'm in much better shape than many of these children," he ended sorrowfully. It wasn't right that these children should have to shoulder the responsibility of an adult, but they did their duties admirably.

"Albus Dumbledore," a new voice growled and he turned to face his rather disheveled and very angry Deputy Headmistress. No doubt, had there not been patients, she would have been shouting at him.

"Hello my dear. I trust you had a nice sleep? Could you tell the rest of the staff that there will be a staff meeting this evening after dinner?" He turned to leave, but Poppy stopped him once more.

"If you want to leave this room, you will drink these." She handed him three different potions, all of them looking extremely unpleasant.

"Surely this isn't necessary," he began, but the glares of the two women stopped him and he sighed before quickly downing all three. They tasted even worse than they looked.

"If you are satisfied," he said once he was able to speak. Minerva looked only slightly mollified. Poppy gave a grudging nod and informed him that she would be bringing more potions for the meeting.

Albus prayed she'd forget, but in the words of Mr. Ronald Weasley: 'Not bloody likely.'

"Shouldn't you go pick Tomoyo up now?" Syaoran asked Eriol in a whisper. They were currently rummaging through the offices of the various Aurors, which sounded much easier than it was. At the moment they were going through a man named Shacklebolt's office. He seemed to have an obsession with the escaped criminal, Sirius Black.

The two boys, both somewhat withdrawn because of the events of the day before, were attempting to make a list of Death Eaters and possible meeting places. The latter wasn't very specific, but would be invaluable help to Ruby Moon, who didn't even have the slightest idea of where Death Eaters could be hiding out.

"I nearly forgot," said Eriol. "I'll be back in a bit." He teleported away and reappeared in the men's bathroom at the airport.

"So sorry," he told the man in the stall with him politely and slipped out. The man was too dumbfounded to say anything or do anything other than gape at him. He later attributed the vision to his long flight and vowed to forget about it.

Meanwhile, Eriol strolled through the airport, with his usual smile. He paused in front of the
arrival screen before heading quickly to gate D12. The plane had been early and he hoped Tomoyo hadn't been waiting long. Then he heard screaming and broke into a run keeping to the wall as the panicked crowd ran in the opposite direction. Another attack? Eriol thought desperately. So soon? His worst fears were confirmed when he saw wizards and witches in black robes slaughtering the poor people around them as if it was a slaughterhouse. "Tomoyo!" he shouted. "Tomoyo!" Sakura was going to kill him if anything happened to her best friend. At least Keroberos was with her.

When he caught sight of the purple-haired girl, his heart leaped into his throat and he didn't know whether to laugh or scream. That is, if he was given to screaming. Which he was not. She was standing between an unconscious pregnant and the Death Eaters, and severely chastising them as only Tomoyo could. Kerberos was in his true form, trying to keep them all in a group, blasting them if they made a move to harm anyone. "Tomoyo," he wheezed, bending over and trying to catch his breath. "You're late," she informed him severely. Only her large violet eyes told him how terrified she was.

"I am," he panted, "very sorry." A group of men and women appeared, dressed in robes. "Arrest the Death Eaters immediately. Then gather the Muggles quickly and charm their memories," the apparent leader informed her group after taking in the situation. The Death Eaters were still frozen in the positions they had been when Eriol cast the spell.

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The Auror was still speaking, but Eriol wasn't listening. We can't be questioned. They can't find out about us. "On the count of three, run," he murmured, grabbing Tomoyo's hand. "One. Two. Three." He jerked Tomoyo into a sprint, vowing to apologize later. Flashes of spells shot at them, and Eriol immediately put a skin-tight shield around the two of them. He could see Kero clinging to Tomoyo's braid from the corner of his eye.

"There!" he said upon seeing stairs and yanked Tomoyo into a sharp left turn. "Down the rail, and keep running until you get to the street. I'll find you if I can't keep up." She gathered Kero into the crook of her arm, and tucked her skirt between her knees before sliding down.

Eriol ducked to make a smaller target, not wanting to give away the fact that he was neither wizard nor Muggle. He saw two men racing after him and quickly tipped over a garbage can right before they came abreast of it. Then he slid down the railing as they scrambled out of the trash. Three quarters of the way down he felt his slide shudder and glanced back. The bars that connected it to the ground were disappearing one by one, and the Aurors were going down the escalator, obviously thinking that they had him. He groaned as he shakily got to his feet. This was something for Syaoran to do, or Sakura. Not him.

Taking a deep breath, Eriol leapt for the ground right before the whole rail collapsed. He landed heavily, and staggered as his right leg twisted. He numbed the nerves in his ankle before running for the exit and bursting out onto the street. He was immediately lost in the crowd, and snickered to himself when he heard the two Aurors cursing. Now to find Tomoyo.

About to cast a tracking spell, he noticed the designer clothes store across the street and decided to take a chance. He found the Japanese girl almost immediately. She made sure to avoid standing in front of the windows as she browsed through the shirts.

"Are you all right?" she asked upon seeing him.

"I've been better," Eriol replied with a grimace. "I think I sprained my ankle, but I'll heal it later. Ready to go?"

"Please," pleaded Kero from where he was hiding in her purse.

"I suppose," said Tomoyo reluctantly. Then she froze. "I forgot my suitcase. It's still in baggage
claim."
Eriol gave her a pleasant smile, but inwardly he wanted to scream. Well, not scream. He didn't scream. He yelled in a... manly way.
"You wait here. I'll find it. Purple, right?"
Tomoyo nodded happily. "Hai."
He stepped outside, and noticed a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye near the mouth of an alley. About to investigate, he paused and decided not to leave Tomoyo alone, so returned to the store.
"On second thought," he said, glancing furtively around the store, "you should probably come with me. I don't want to leave you on your own."
"Hey," said a muffled voice from the depths of Tomoyo's purse.
Eriol sighed and said, "I would prefer something less conspicuous than a flying stuffed animal or a winged lion to guard Tomoyo."
"All right," she said amenably, and followed him. To her surprise, he led her down an alley.
'I saw something' Eriol mouthed to her by way of explanation. He looked around and his eyes came to rest on a group of garbage cans. Quietly, with a spell ready to be released at the slightest notice, he pushed aside a garbage can.
He immediately found a knifepoint touching his throat. Tomoyo gasped in horror.
"No magic tricks," growled a dirty, scrawny girl, dressed in tattered clothing, "or I'll slit your throat."
"All right," Eriol said peaceably, not sure if he wanted to frighten her by using his magic or not. She was obviously somewhat accustomed to people who used wands and wasn't aware there were other ways to do magic. "What do you want?"
He saw the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Obviously she had not thought that far ahead.
"Hand over your stick," she said at last. "And your money."
"I don't have a stick," he told her, thankful that Tomoyo wasn't drawing attention to herself. The street rat snickered at his double entendre, and he glared at her.
"Then why were those magicians chasing you?" she demanded.
"We saw something they didn't want us to see, and we didn't feel like being questioned. They're not terribly respectful of privacy, you see." Suddenly the knife was in Eriol's hand and the girl was left clutching thin air. She watched him with wide eyes. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that all magic users depend on wands and magic-imbued objects."
His intense look was replaced with his usual smile and he returned the knife, hilt first. "My name is Eriol, and this is Tomoyo. Nice to meet you."
Tomoyo bowed politely, content to leave the talking to Eriol for the moment.
The girl stared at Eriol as if he had displayed three rows of razor sharp teeth and declared that he was a vegan. "Kestrel," she said finally, regaining her wits and retrieved her jaw from where it hung near the ground. She had just pocketed the knife when the three heard a shout. They looked up and saw the two wizards bearing down on them.
"They'll never catch criminals if they give themselves away like that," Tomoyo observed calmly. Kestrel, however, jumped and Tomoyo saw an expression of fear and anger flash over her face. "This way," she told them, and slipped through a broken basement window.
Eriol decided that it would be prudent to follow someone who knew the city like the back of her hand, and motioned Tomoyo through before following. Apparently the wizards were wary of using magic in the streets, as no spells shot their way. He figured they'd gained a few minutes using the window since the men would have trouble wiggling through.
The girl led them up rotten, wooden stairs and pushed open a door. Eriol quickly, but quietly closed the door, and, seeing that there was no lock, added a bolt flick of his finger. He looked at Kestrel and found her watching him with a strange expression on her face.
"Quickly," she whispered, "before the owners or the sods get here." They heard the Aurors pound up the stairs, and Kestrel jumped before scuttling to the front door.
They slipped out the front door and down onto the street without further mishap. Apparently the inhabitants were away. Next, they turned down a sidestreet where a boy was rummaging through
the garbage. He looked up and his face broke into a grin. "Kestrel," he greeted. "What're you doing with respectables like them?"
"Dan, magickers are trying to get us," she said quickly, looking around nervously. The boy's expression darkened, and there was a hint of panic in his eyes. "Sewers are empty right now. Help me get this thing open."
With Eriol's help they managed to get the manhole open and climbed down, one by one. "Eriol-san," whispered Tomoyo worriedly as she passed by him.
"Don't worry," he reassured her. "I'll set the shield to grime and bacteria instead of magic."
"Arigatou," she murmured, and clambered past him, holding her skirt with one hand, and using the other to cling to the ladder. Eriol was the last down, and he slid the manhole cover shut just in time, although he didn't know it. The Aurors had just reached the empty sidestreet.
Tomoyo and Eriol followed the two urchins along the walkway in silent, until Eriol could no longer keep his curiosity in check.
"Why are you so terrified of witches and wizards, and how do you know about them?" he asked at last. "From what I know, they mostly keep to themselves."
Kestrel and Dan exchanged glances.
"They don't notice homeless people. We're as good as invisible to them, and we usually hide besides. It's not uncommon for us to witness them perform magic," Kestrel explained. "On the few occasions we're noticed, and can't get away, they erase our memory."
Eriol frowned. Erasing memories among sorcerers was strictly against taboo. He'd only done three times, both during extreme emergencies, when lives were on the line.
Kestrel was looking livid, an expression mirrored in Dan's face.
"Sometimes they get careless, or they just ain't very good," the girl continued bitterly. "Maybe they just don't care. Their reasons don't matter. About a year ago they riddled Anna May's memory with holes and left her as a vegetable. She was a bag lady, and she was nice to us kids. They as good as killed her. You can't survive on the streets for long without your wits. That's why we hate 'em, and fear 'em. I know they probably ain't all like that, but why risk it? They all erase the memories of anyone who stumbles onto them, even if it's their own fault. Why make things complicated? So the homeless all know, and we run, 'cause what do we got that'll beat 'em in the end?"
Nakuru was incredibly, incurably bored. She'd been searching for three days with no sign of a large gathering of Dark Magic.
On the other hand, this chocolate stick was almost as good as pocky. It was too bad, really, that Japan was about as far away from England as one could get. The pocky had been an unexpected bonus, almost as good as glomping Touya-kun.
She should speak with Master about importing pocky.
Nakuru blinked as her cell phone rang, and then smiled as she skipped down the street. "Hello Suppi!" she screeched happily into her phone.
"I do not know a 'Suppi,' Ruby Moon," said a familiar voice.
"You're Suppi, Suppi," she said with a wicked smile.
"I do not have time for juvenile games. Master Eriol requested that I tell you to look near Loch Ness, the Orkney Islands, Ben Nevis, Inverness, Cornwall, Kingston upon Hull, the southwestern tip of Wales, and the hunting grounds of the Huntress."
"Not the Green Knight?" she asked in surprise.
"You know as well as I that that Fae wouldn't stand for them in his forest," Spinel said before there was a clatter and he began muttering under his breath. "My paws are not made to hold a phone. Good bye, Nakuru, and Master wishes for you to make haste."
"Bye-bye, Suppi," she replied gleefully, and then paused and tried to think logically. Where should she start?
Kingston upon Hill was closest. Then she'd make her way to Scotland before flying southwest to check Ireland and Wales.
Satisfied with her plan, she rewarded herself by buying another candy bar. She needed her energy, after all.
Sakura groaned, and her eyes fluttered open reluctantly. It was one of those times when it felt like she'd slept for only five seconds when she needed to feel refreshed and awake. She stumbled over to her suitcase, shivering at the feeling of cold stone on her bare feet, and pulled out her next set of clothes. Her eyes felt gritty and there was a stale taste in her mouth. The clock read 3:22 in the afternoon.

Not for the first time, she wished her room had windows, and grabbed a sweatshirt just in case the rest of the castle was as cold as her room. As it was, she was surprised she couldn't see her own breath. Maybe her clock was wrong and it was really 3:30 in the morning.

Sakura tiredly evaluated her level of power and found it to only be about half recovered. You'd think I'd feel more rested after over 12 hours of sleep, she thought sardonically as she dug out and devoured two leftover sandwich, a roll of crackers, a banana, and an apple from a paper bag since it was too late for lunch in the Great Hall, and too early for dinner. She felt better when she was through, and her energy level immediately shot up a bit.

Sakura had fastened her cloak and was about to set out for a class when she remembered that Orenda hadn't appeared since the battle. Feeling guilty and more than a bit worried, she scanned the castle, and then the grounds around it with no luck. Her eyes widened in panic and began to water. It was as if the Rithlan had never existed.

Dipping into her limited supply of magic, Sakura doused for the last person to have seen Orenda. Drawing her cloak tightly around her slim frame, she set out following the invisible tie. She figured that if she looked like she knew what she was doing and had a purpose in walking the halls, no one would stop her, and she wouldn't need a spell to hide herself. It had worked before, and she did have her good luck bracelet.

Either no one was patrolling the halls or her bracelet really worked, because she reached the classroom without any mishaps.

Dipping once more into her decreasing store of energy, she cast an avert spell and slipped inside the classroom unnoticed.

Sakura didn't look around her. She focused on the invisible thread with a single-minded intensity, almost surprised when it ended.

Of course, she thought tiredly. I asked Orenda to watch over Harry Potter. I should have guessed that he would be the last to see her.

Deciding to wait until dinner before interrogating him, she looked around for the first time and recognized her surroundings.

This is the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. But who's teaching? Sakura wondered. She only vaguely remembered the grizzled old man as someone she'd passed in the halls the day before.

He must be the third professor that Lupin-sensei mentioned. What was his name?

Since it would be a while before class was over, and Sakura had no idea what was being taught, she decided to do another exercise that helped her recover her power: meditation.

In the middle of her breathing exercises, she felt someone prod the avert spell she had set up and her eyes flew open. She scanned the room, but no one was paying attention to her, and the teacher's back was to her.

Maybe I'm getting paranoid, Sakura thought, and returned to her meditation.

There it was again. A quick prod at her spell.

Sakura frowned and examined the room more closely. No one so much as glanced in her direction.

The third time she was ready and her subconscious followed it back to the caster. It was the professor?

Sakura opened her eyes and cautiously made her way closer to the man, studying him. It took her a moment to see his false eye, and she nearly laughed in relief. It was a magical eye that allowed him to see through things, and spun around in its socket to see the whole room. It's glance automatically tried to see her; it wasn't a conscious effort.

When she really watched the eye it made her feel a bit queasy, though.

She glanced out the window as she returned to her seat and finally noticed that it was pouring.
outside. The rain pounded against the window so hard that she was surprised it didn't break the
glass. She was also surprised that she hadn't noticed sooner. Sakura had a difficult time returning
to meditation, until she fell into the rhythm of the rain. She was so engrossed in her meditation that
she almost missed it the class left the room.

Please let me hear what happened to Orenda-san, she pleaded with the universe.
Either the universe was particularly receptive today or the bracelet was one hell of a lucky charm.
"Hermione, I'm telling you, I don't know how I escaped the Killing Curse. All I saw was a spark
of light go zooming over my shoulder, and then there was an explosion of light that blinded me for
a good minute. Maybe it was a firefly that managed to head off the curse," Harry said irritably.
"You know as well as I that a firefly won't stop the curse. The Killing Curse has too much power
to be stopped by a bug."

Harry cut her off mid-lecture. "Maybe it was a hell of a firefly. Maybe an unlucky pixie got in the
way. I don't really care how I survived."

"Fine," Hermione snapped, throwing up her arms and nearly poking a passing student in the eye.
She stomped off in the direction of the Great Hall for dinner. Ron and Harry followed at a more
leisurely pace, hoping that she would have cooled down by the time they got there.

Sakura froze, trying to process the information and piece together the uncertainties. Orenda-san
had shielded Harry from getting killed, and had been eradicated in the process? That didn't make
sense. No one knew how to send a Rithlan on; everyone just assumed it was impossible. Could it
be that they had to have a Purpose before they were used. It would make sense, since Rithlan
were made because they lacked a purpose.

Sakura mourned the loss of her new friend, but was pleased that she had gotten a chance to move
on.

Yawning, she trotted to the Great Hall, taking a risk and allowing everyone to see her. Part of the
reason was to get experience fitting in, and the other part was that she was conserving energy until
it reached full strength.

Sakura nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard a crack of thunder. There were a few
muffled shrieks from the Great Hall, but she noticed one girl in the hallway with her nose pressed
against the window and a vaguely happy expression on her face as lightning flashed.

She took a deep breath. "Hi," Sakura said nervously, sidling up next to the girl. "I'm... Alex
Smith. You like watching the lightning?"

"Luna Lovegood," said the girl dreamily. "I'm looking for the rare Lightning Bogies." She turned
back to the window.

"Luna Lovegood," said the girl dreamily. "I'm looking for the rare Lightning Bogies." She turned
back to the window.

Sakura blinked. I've never heard of that before. Seeing that Luna was engrossed in her Lightning
Bogie watching, she left, slipping into the Great Hall. She decided to sit at the table under the
badger banner. Hufflepuff, she remembered from Hogwarts: A History.

Dinner was largely uneventful and contained an almost empty feeling in the air. About a quarter of
the seats in the Great Hall were vacant, as their occupants were recovering in the Infirmary. Albus
Dumbledore, she noticed, had recovered, although he occasionally trailed his beard in the soup.

Afterward, Sakura decided to tail Minerva for no other reason than variety. Also, she hadn't had
much of a chance to visit with the older woman, since she'd been avoiding her class. If anyone
would recognize Sakura, she would.

It seemed she had picked a good time to follow her. Minerva led her to the gargoyle statue that
guarded the Headmaster's office. She remembered following three professors the night before.
However, rather than the candy-based password, Minerva McGonagall looked around
suspiciously before leaning close and murmuring, "Aethelweard."

Must have changed the password, Sakura figured.

She frowned when she entered a large room. A table stood in the center surrounded by padded
chairs, and a large fireplace was situated in the back of the room. The flames rose high, and
Sakura immediately made her way over to them to warm herself.

Apparently a different password took the person to a different place. Sakura grinned wryly.
Clever, she thought.

It was several minutes before all of staff appeared, and Sakura took the time to evaluate her magic
She sighed and decided to forgo the invisibility spell for her less tiring avert spell. Her energy was about the same as it was this morning. She glared around the room grumpily, seeing for the first time the whole Hogwarts staff. Another professor was looking at least as irritated as she felt, and she recognized him as the Potions professor that Harry Potter and friends more or less detested. She only half-listened as they discussed the security measures they could take and reported on the injuries of victims.

"I believe that someone has infiltrated Hogwarts."
Sakura froze. Ohshitohshi
Her feet pounded against the floor as she sprinted away from the room. She paid no attention to where she was going or whether anyone pursued her. She just had to put distance between herself and Albus Dumbledore.

Kingston upon Hill was a dud, so she'd teleported herself several kilometers away from the bottom of Ben Nevis and then flying to the mountain, just in case teleporting set off any alarms.

Oooo, Nakuru thought delightedly. A large gathering of Dark magic had registered. Finally, something to do.

Spinel Sun claimed that she didn't have enough room in her head to be properly afraid of things like powerful enemies. Therefore Ruby Moon had no qualms about swooping down among wizards in broad daylight, beaming all around her at the astonished dark wizards and witches.

"HI!" she exclaimed, and brought out a roll of baggies before moving among them. It said much for her eccentric personality that only a few wizards retained their wits enough to attack her. Everyone else was too stunned, and the spells just flowed off of her anyway.

"I just came for a bit of your DNA is all," Ruby Moon explained cheerfully, as she yanked hair off of random people's heads, and stuck them in the plastic baggies. "Oh! I nearly forgot." She extracted a wicked looking needle from her pocket, and grabbed the hand of the person closest to her. The witch yelped as Ruby Moon stabbed her and tried to attack the moon guardian, who simply froze the woman before getting the blood into a miniature tube.

Spells were flying at her thick and fast, and all of them slid off of her shield, as she did the same for several other witches and wizards.

"That's it for now," Ruby Moon said. "Ta ta."

She disappeared just as two burly wizards decided to dive for her. They crashed into each other, knocking themselves out, and an eerie laugh echoed around the gathering.

"Master won't be happy," whimpered one short, rotund wizard, as he wrung his hands nervously. Nakuru repeated her performance at the Orkney Islands, Cornwall, and the southwestern tip of Wales. The other places Suppi had mentioned were false alarms.

Severus looked to be in a state of shock, a thing so rare that it did not go unnoticed, even as Anne Vector struggled to get a gag on Bellatrix Lestrange, who seemed to be foaming at the mouth amid her string of obscenities. It was duly noted that she could have given Mrs. Black a run for her money.

"Severus, what is it?" asked the Headmaster in concern, raising his voice to be heard over Bellatrix's screaming.

Finally, Remus couldn't take it. "Silencio," he snapped, and Anne shrugged before returning the gag to her pocket.

"Albus," Severus said plaintively, and extremely out of character. "She winked at me."

"Bellatrix?" asked Minerva in disbelief.

"No, the girl," he snapped halfheartedly.

Albus patted him on the back. "I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it," he said solemnly, not quite managing to keep his amusement from showing. He immediately became serious, and said, "Did anyone recognize the girl?"

No one had gotten more than a glimpse of her, some not even that much. No one, not even Minerva, knew the girl. The sheer impossibility that it could be Sakura, as well as the obscure glimpse, had prevented any recognition from the woman among them who knew her best.

"Who - or what - was she, Albus?" asked Filius Flitwick, "that she could move about undetected? And when did she manage to switch places with Xiomara?"

"I don't know." Dumbledore frowned. "Irma, is there anything in the library that would explain this?"

The librarian shook her head. "No creature I can think of would have that much power, unless she was a demon."

Remus shook his head. "Demons are not friendly or helpful. That girl was both."

"Unless you count the fact that she has traumatized Severus."

Several other professors snickered.

"There was no sign of her," Serena Sinistra announced as she entered the room. "I tried Tracking
Spells and Revealing Spells, but nothing worked."
Albus sighed and turned his attention to their prisoner, who was determined to make herself
understood by any who read lips, since her voice had been silenced. He was extremely worried
about Madam Hooch's welfare. "Severus, would you fetch Veritaserum?"
The Potions Master turned and left, his face twisted into its usual sneer.
Sakura leaned against the rail for support. Her limbs were trembling, and she was panting from her
panicked flight. She had no idea where she was, and at the moment she didn't care.
Sakura cursed herself for appearing in plain view. She had been trying to conserve energy, but
had ended up spending much more than she would have otherwise.
"Password?"
Sakura jumped, and stared at the very large portrait of a fat lady. "Pardon?" she asked.
"If you want to get in, I need the password," the lady said impatiently.
In where? she wondered. "Sorry," she murmured and turned to leave. Halfway down the hall she
met a group of students heading toward the portrait.
Sakura did a quick about face, and trailed along behind them, keeping her face down as if her
shoes were the most interesting things she had ever seen. No one gave her a second glance as they
spoke the password.
"Hippogriff."
She slipped inside before the portrait swung closed, and looked around at the couches and chairs,
tables and leftover bits of parchment that were scattered around the room. The dominant colors
were maroon and gold.
This must be the dormitories, Sakura realized. Or one of them, anyway, she amended,
remembering that there were four Houses.
She recognized Harry Potter's aura, and was about to go look for him when Syaoran called
telepathically.
We're in the forest.
Sakura sighed and abandoned her quest, placing a marker on the frame of the portrait as she left so
she'd be able to find the place again.
I'm coming.
She looked for a staircase, figuring that if she kept going down she'd eventually get to the ground
floor. No one was near the main doors, so she quickly slipped out and a bucket of water was
immediately dumped on her head.
Oh, nevermind. The sky was just falling.
It certainly felt like it, anyway. The rain was coming down in solid sheets, and she could barely
see a meter in any direction.
She could feel Syaoran in the forest near the lake, and she carefully made her way in his direction,
taking cover when she could, and wrapping her black robe around herself in an effort to blend into
the night, just in case any eye could penetrate the blinding rain. A dog barked as she passed the
large man's cabin. Sakura froze behind a tree as he opened the door. Light flooded the doorway
and he carried a crossbow in his hand.
"Who's there?" he called out gruffly, but Sakura was already moving away, walking in silence,
wrapped in the night.
She heard the door shut, and breathed a little easier. The lake lapped at the shore, soothing her taut
nerves. The man had been the last obstacle to avoid, and she moved a bit faster, scowling as the
rain permeated her cloak and plastered her hair to her head. Her clothes felt five times heavier by
the time she came upon Syaoran and -
"Tomoyo-chan!" Sakura exclaimed happily, momentarily forgetting her wet clothes as she stepped
into their dry, warm shelter.
"Sakura-chan, daijoubu?"
"Daijoubu," she replied with a sigh. "It's raining," she complained. "This is like a vacation. It's not
supposed to rain!"
"Vacation?" asked Syaoran, staring at her.
"Well, aside from the spying and protecting and war and stuff," Sakura amended grudgingly.
"The point is, it's not supposed to rain. Where's Eriol?"
"He's up to something," Syaoran said with a suspicious frown. "Nakuru came back and he's holed himself up in his mansion. I'm on my way to Ben Nevis. It's the closest gathering of Death Eaters to Hogwarts that Nakuru could find, as well as the largest. She hasn't seen this Voldemort character, though."
"What are you doing here, Tomoyo?" Sakura asked. "Not that I'm not happy you're here."
"I had to see my Sakura-chan, of course," the girl replied happily. "And I'm here to cut your hair."
"N-nani?" The sight of Tomoyo with scissors unnerved the poor Mistress of the Cards.
"Well, if you're going among the students and don't want to be recognized by Tabby-chan, you need a disguise. The smallest changes can have the biggest impact," Tomoyo explained. "Now sit."
"But it's my hair," Sakura said plaintively.
"Hai, and I'm going to cut it," Tomoyo said patiently.
Sakura resigned herself to her friend's order. "Fine. Cut it," she said airily, flinging her damp hair over her shoulder. "It means nothing to me."
"Is that why you have such a pained expression on your face?" Syaoran asked innocently.
"You be quiet." Sakura gave him a disgruntled glare.
"It's the couch for you tonight," Tomoyo added wickedly as she began snipping.
Syaoran and Sakura both blushed. Tomoyo wouldn't have been surprised to see steam come out of Syaoran's ears.
The three of them conversed lightly as Tomoyo cut Sakura's hair. "Done," she said finally, and fished a mirror out of her pocket to show Sakura her handiwork.
"It looks like it did when I was 11," Sakura commented. "Arigatou gozaimasu."
"What's your opinion of Albus Dumbledore?" Syaoran asked as Sakura stretched.
She froze, suddenly recalling what had happened earlier.
"He's crazy like a fox, and too clever by half," she said hesitantly.
Tomoyo smiled. "You're really picking up these English terms."
"It's a phrase I heard in my dreams," she replied.
"What's wrong?" asked Syaoran when Sakura didn't smile back.
"He saw me. He knew I was inside the school, but he didn't know who or what I was, and then I had to help a professor or he would have died, and I tried to save energy so I let go of the invisibility spell, but Dumbledore recovered so much faster than I thought, and he almost caught me, and I don't know if Minerva saw me or not, and I'm sorry." Sakura realized that she was babbling and burst into tears.
"I'm sorry," she murmured over and over as Syaoran hugged her, looking distinctly awkward.
"Don't worry about it. If we get caught, we get caught. We all knew we couldn't do this forever. It's the most convenient route, not the only one. You've lasted this long. I doubt they even know who or what you are. I'm sure you'll be all right, just be a little more careful now that they're onto you," he told her softly. Then he glared at Tomoyo over Sakura's head and mouthed, 'Turn that off.'
Tomoyo hid the camera as Sakura extracted herself from Syaoran's arms. "You're right," she said, hiccuping a bit as she wiped her eyes. "I'd better be heading back." She hugged Tomoyo. "Good luck at the Ministry."
"Luck," her friend replied as Sakura quickly kissed Syaoran before heading back to the castle. She paused, and turned around, fishing for something in her pocket.
"I almost forgot," Sakura said sheepishly as she handed Tomoyo a rather sodden piece of paper.
"Can you give this to Eriol and make sure he doesn't forget that the stones need to be about the size of a fist?"
"What's it for?" asked Tomoyo, examining the list.
"For the werewolf I met. I'm going to return his curse to the gift it used to be."
Sakura recalled vividly T'ai Yat-sen's lecture on werewolves she'd heard as part of her more formal training:
"Lycanthropy was meant to be a gift, a blessing to transcend all magical and non-magical barriers.
The transformation into a wolf would be painless, and a miracle for those with little or no magic. Lycanthropy could be passed on to those the werewolf considered worthy. A rash giving of the gift was strictly taboo, and harshly punished if the receiver was unwilling. It was reversible, however, until the full moon. Many werewolves only gave their gift with the waning of the moon, to allow the receiver time to change his or her mind. Werewolves ran in packs, like true wolves, and taught the newcomers about the life of a wolf.

"Something went wrong with the casting of the spell. Over time it morphed into something cruel and ugly. Most believe that someone or something, a rogue sorcerer, perhaps, or a wizard, as some of the more superstitious think, tampered with the spell without the caster being aware of it. As a result, werewolves can only change on the full moon with excruciating pain. They lose their humanity and go mad, killing whatever they come across more often than not. A spell has been discovered that will return the curse to the blessing it should be. The Lupe is a group of powerful sorcerers and sorceresses that search the world for werewolves in order to fix the gift."

"When will I meet wizards?" she had asked.

"There are no wizards. If they ever existed, they are long gone now. No one has seen them in centuries."

"What were they like?"

"Like anyone, I suppose. Legend says that they were not quite as powerful as sorcerers, unless they used the rituals."

"Our rituals?"

"Yes, although I imagine that both wizards and sorcerers shaped the old rituals."

Sakura shook her head. Wizards were no longer legend. "Sayonara," she said and walked away. "Burn that tape," Syaoran warned Tomoyo as soon as Sakura was gone. Tomoyo merely giggled.
Betrayal and Imperfection

Chapter Summary

- and that's not all I see
One of you here dining, one of my twelve chosen will leave to betray me
-Jesus Christ Superstar

The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thickens man's blood with cold.
The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.
Four times fifty living men
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan),
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
They dropped down one by one.
-Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!
-Rudyard Kipling, If-

She'd told them, curse them. She'd told them all they'd asked, all she knew. She'd given and given of herself until there was nothing left, under the compulsion of veritaserum. Nothing left but bitterness and hate for them at how they'd forced her to betray her master. She hadn't even brought the damnable traitor down with her.

Curse the girl, whatever she was. What sort of weapon did Albus Dumbledore harbor? There weren't even rumors of a powerful being in the form of a girl in residence at Hogwarts. And now she was locked up, unable to return, even at hermaster's call if, indeed, he would. Her humiliation would be well-known; she was locked in this box of a room without even a face to curse and spit upon except for those in her mind.

She would have killed herself before telling them everything, had they not confiscated the wand and stiletto.

And still they had had to restrain her and remove the spell that would destroy her before she voiced an answer to their questions.
They'd milked her dry of her loyalty and would put a stop to the Dark Lord's plans before releasing the news of her capture. There was little satisfaction in the fact that they still hadn't discovered the whereabouts of Xiomara Hooch.

In the dark room, devoid of any sign of humanity or hope, it began to complete the insanity that had begun to descend upon her since her imprisonment in Azkaban not so many years ago.
"I am Bellatrix Lestrange," she whispered, "and I will have my revenge. My lord will reward his
faithful servants."
But was she still considered faithful?
A murmur in the dim, doorless, windowless room to the cold, unyielding stone.
"I am Bellatrix Lestrange."
Eriol waited patiently, his normal, creepy grin the first thing passengers saw as they left the plane. Several nearly turned right back around, and a few searched for a security guard. He merely ignored them, thankful that this second visit to the airport was so much quieter.
A familiar aura drew close. His grin widened almost imperceptibly and a certain, different warmth touched his dark blue eyes as an older woman stepped off into the terminal.
"Kaho," he greeted warmly. "Back so soon?"
She shot him an amused glance as they strolled toward the baggage claim. "Someone sent me a message last night through the oracle of the moon, requesting my presence," Kaho said, with the slightest emphasis on the first word. "That person had the temple believing him to be a god."
"Remarkable," Eriol commented delightedly with a wide grin. He coughed a bit when she raised an eyebrow at him. "How was the Philippines?" he added hastily.
"Wonderful," Kaho said happily. "The old priestess of the moon temple I stayed at taught me quite a few new spells, as well as a new ritual for blessing. I taught a group of acolytes some of the basics of astral projection."
She paused and rummaged through her pockets. "I brought you something, but I don't remember where I put it..."
Eriol sweatdropped. "I'm sure you'll find whatever it is soon, but we should be going now."
The two of them retrieved her luggage in companionable silence. Kaho knew that nothing short of pocky (or failing that, liberal amounts of alcohol) would make him talk if he wasn't ready.
She headed for the exit, but Eriol stopped her and led her to a secluded corner. "We're taking the shortcut," he told her, and teleported the two of them home.
"What's been going on while I was gone?" she asked, steadying herself on the railing. Normally Eriol preferred not to rely on magic when ordinary means would provide the same service. Most sorcerers and sorceresses were of a similar mentality. "And why is it so quiet?" she added upon realizing what was missing: the noise of his two guardians.
"Spinel is doing some research for me in the library. Ruby Moon is recovering from the mission I sent her on." He led her to his laboratory. "This is an emergency; there's not a moment to lose. You're the only one with training in genetics that I was comfortable bringing in this late in the game." He gestured to a row of tubes and plastic bags. "I need you to study this DNA. Compare to both sorcerers and non-magical people. I have a feeling that it can give us a critical piece of the puzzle we're missing."
She nodded absently as she looked around the room. "Where did the DNA come from?" she asked.
"Sakura, Syaoran, and myself discovered a community of wizards and witches." Kaho raised an eyebrow, her mind working furiously to understand the impact this discovery would have on the world.
"We're watching them in the middle of their war against their Dark Lord Voldemort."
"Spying, you mean," she cut in with a grin. Eriol shrugged carelessly. "We want to know how we missed them all of these centuries, and why direct magical attacks don't work very well on them."
"The Mistress of the Cards, the Li clan leader, and half of Clow Reed's reincarnation," she mused as she went to wash her hands. "This is an emergency."
"Forgive me, but I need to be escorting Tomoyo to the Ministry of Magic. I don't think I'll have a chance to return here, but don't hesitate to make yourself comfortable," Eriol grinned. "After all, you do live here."
He disappeared before she had a chance to speak, but she simply turned to her work, burying the flame of curiosity within her. She could wait. And after all, the sooner she finished this task, the sooner she would see him and ask him the many questions he'd left with her.
"Hello, Tomoyo."
The girl looked up above her tea cup to see Eriol standing before her. "What were you up to?" she asked pleasantly as he took a seat across from her.
"Simply seeing he affairs of my house," he replied smoothly.
"Liar," Tomoyo replied amusedly.
Eriol sighed. "You're too perceptive," he complained as he signaled the waitress for a cup of tea. "Are you going to tell me?" she asked, taking another sip of her drink.
"I had a visitor," he explained cautiously, resting his head on his hand. "I needed help, so I called for someone with scientific training."
"I didn't know Mizuki-sensei had scientific training," Tomoyo replied calmly, her eyes never leaving his face. She treasured the stunned look on his face, and giggled, unable to hold her laughter in.
"I hate to think I'm that transparent," he managed at last as the waitress set a cup of tea in front of him.
"You're not," Tomoyo reassured him. "You're my most challenging friend yet. It's just that your eyes seem to light up and you project a feeling of warmth whenever you mention Mizuki-sensei."
"I must remember to watch myself," Eriol muttered peevishly. "And she's not your teacher anymore. You might consider dropping the honorifics when we're in the Ministry."
"Of course," she said amiably as he downed his tea. "But perhaps we should pick up food at a grocery store before we go to the Ministry. I don't know what you've been doing for food, but this way meals won't have to take you away from your work."
Eriol decided not to tell her that he and Syaoran had been stealing from the cafeteria.
"After you madame," he said gallantly, sweeping her an elegant bow.
"Why, thank you kind sir," she replied dryly, and the two of them left the cafe.
Minerva sighed and checked herself, making sure that she wasn't carrying anything that would give her away. Her wand was tucked into the sleeves of her robes, and her hair was out of her face in its usual bun. She removed scratch pieces of paper and a few quills from her pocket. The ones that had writing on it she left in her drawer. Blank pieces of paper she kept with her in case she needed to write a message.
She bit her lip as she put the small yellow 'candy' in her breast pocket. Every spy and member of the Order carried one. It was a suicide pill that Severus had created, and if anyone was caught they would eat it to prevent Voldemort from learning of their plans. It would take only six seconds for death to arrive.
Severus assured them that the poison was painless, and there would be no trace of it left in the corpse, but Minerva prayed that she'd never have the chance to find out. He had not been trusted enough to learn the ingredients in the fatal, painful poison Voldemort had developed.
Minerva paused as she felt the lump beneath the neck of her robes. "What?" she wondered, and drew out the necklace with the sakura blossom pendant. Her thumb traced the petals as she remembered the sweet Japanese girl that had taken care of her. She hoped that Sakura would be all right and remain free of Voldemort's long reaching arm. Little did she know that Sakura was in the very heart of his power.
A glimmer of suspicion tried to thread its way into her mind, but Syaoran's buffer was too well placed. Minerva's mind had become so accustomed to dismissing suspicions about Sakura that she did it automatically, even though the spell to prevent suspicion had dissolved.
Minerva regretfully removed the necklace and placed it on her desk. It seemed to call out to her, refusing to be left behind. "But that's ridiculous," Minerva murmured and quickly turned her back on the necklace. She couldn't take it with her. A cat with a necklace would stand out.
She shifted into a cat midstep. First stop, the American embassy.
Sakura wrung out her clothes as soon as she reentered the school, and she soon had a miniature lake at her feet. Sodden, cold, and bedraggled, she squelched her way up the stairs.
A wordless roar emerged from behind her as she topped the stairs, and she immediately crouched down and peeked down at the Entrance Hall.
"When I catch the student that tracked mud in on my CLEAN FLOORS!!" bellowed the unkempt
man with the cat.
Sakura cringed. "Uh oh," she whispered, suddenly realizing that she'd left a trail that led right to her. As he strode along the trail, muttering furiously to his cat, she quickly removed her shoes and sprinted in the direction of her room, her wet robe slapping at her heels. She soon outdistanced the man and arrived in her room with no one the wiser.

Sakura shivered with cold as she leaned against her door. "I need a fire," she muttered, rummaging through her pockets as she made her way to the small fireplace. "Aha." She pulled out Firey, and watched as a thin trickle of flame flowed from the card to the fireplace, immediately igniting the wood. The orange light illuminated the room, and Sakura relaxed as the fire popped and crackled. She slipped out of her wet clothes, and paused when she heard something 'clunk.' Sakura looked down just in time to see something go rolling under the couch, and thank God that it hadn't landed on her foot.

She quickly hung her clothes up on different pieces of furniture to dry before getting into the borrowed bathrobe, and putting another black robe over it. Then she got on her hands and knees and peered under the couch. Was that a rock?
Sakura stretched out a hand, and grasped a spherical, egg-sized crystal. An opal, she recognized. She prodded it a bit with her aura, and realized that not only did it naturally increase magickal energy, it was fully charged. I must be more out of it than I thought if I didn't notice Syaoran slip it into my pocket, she realized with a small smile.

She gathered her pajamas into a bundle with the opal tucked in the middle and headed off to the baths.
Sakura checked her power level. About 1/3 of her magic had recharged so far. Maybe she would finally become acclimated to this time zone.

The teacher's meeting had dispersed, and members of the Order of the Phoenix had been contacted and put into position to thwart the plans to attack Madame O'Donnel's Private School for the Magically Gifted. The planned assassination attempt on the American ambassador and visiting Carrie Donald, American President of Magic, was being relayed to the two by Minerva in cat form. Only Albus knew she planned to spy on the Death Eater camp in Cornwall afterward.
"Remus," said Dumbledore as the werewolf was about to leave. "Could I speak with you?"
"Of course, Albus," replied Lupin, wondering what the Headmaster wanted.
The older wizard waited for him to become settled before gazing at him with his piercing blue eyes over half moon spectacles and asking, "Is there anything you wish to tell me?"
If that isn't a bit generic, Remus thought detachedly, and wondered how to put into words what was troubling him. Finally, growing more and more uncomfortable under Dumbledore's gaze, he decided to go for the direct approach.
"Why do you ask?"
All right, maybe that wasn't very direct, but the charged silence of the room was distinctly uncomfortable and not conducive to thinking.
"When I mentioned that professors should be wary of anything, you seemed to have something in mind," replied Albus easily.
Remus could swear that the man had more eyes than he knew what to do with. Then he just swore, albeit silently. Then he came to a decision.
"Albus, can you tell if someone's memory has been charmed?" he asked.
"If I'm allowed access to a person's thoughts," answered the Headmaster, being deliberately obtuse.
Remus paused. Did he really want someone - even Albus - rummaging through his mind? But wasn't the possible danger to the Wizarding World more important than his privacy? He glanced at Albus, but found it impossible to read his expression. With a heavy sigh, he said, "I suspect something happened last night that I can't remember. It's possible I'm imagining things, but I feel like I've forgotten something important. Also, when I looked at my clock it was 10:25, but I glanced only a few moments later, and it read 10:43."
"Was there anything different that you can remember?" asked Albus, furrowing his eyebrows.
Remus hesitated, and he frowned. "I need to know as much as I can about this, Remus. I wouldn't
ask if it weren't important."
"I know, Albus," he murmured. "There wasn't anything physical that had changed, but... I felt hopeful, and disappointed, as if... someone had made a promise, but I wouldn't see the results, or I wouldn't see them right away." He ran a hand through his hair, feeling almost embarrassed. "I don't know if it makes any sense, but -"
Dumbledore held up a hand. "I don't pretend to understand how you feel, but I think I have an idea of what you're trying to say. I think I will know what you felt if you give me permission to search your mind for a Memory Charm."
Remus bowed his head. "Yes."
With that one word, Albus delved into his mind, and the younger man fell into a sort of trance, barely aware of another presence in his mind. Few people could sense an experienced Legilimens if he didn't want to be found.
Albus tried to ignore Remus' thoughts out of respect for his privacy, but it was difficult to do so. It took him little searching to find his memory of the previous night, partly because it was so recent, and partly because it was something Remus had been thinking of.
It took him a little more time to find the point Remus had mentioned, between the two glances of the clock that spanned both several seconds and twenty minutes.
Albus concentrated, and managed to find the little skip where in a single instant, Remus had gone from looking in the mirror to looking at the bed, without moving his body.
What he found - or rather, what he didn't find - stunned him. There was nothing. It was as if the world between 10:20 and 10:43 had simply ceased to exist. There wasn't the usual seal of a Memory Charm.
There wasn't anything.
Albus stopped, baffled, and then decided to take a chance, and pried at the skip in time, forcing it to show him. It was like beating against a brick wall, but he gritted his teeth, and pried... Show me. Show me.
There was something familiar, a sparkle of pink, and then intense pain shot through him/Remus, and he suddenly found himself in his own body, sweating.
Remus was clutching his head, and panting. It had felt as if his head were being split apart. "What did you do?" he asked hoarsely, hardly aware of what he was saying, the memory of the pain prominent in his mind. "What did you find?"
"I am sorry, Remus," Albus said, reaching across to touch the other man's hand. "I had no idea that would happen."
Remus Lupin remained silent, waiting. There was something wrong. He knew it.
"Your memory has been sealed away, but not by any spell I know of. It did not feel malevolent, but I urge you to be careful. There was something familiar about the charm. And there was a spark of pink energy before the pain." Albus sighed and stood, turning to leave. "Do you remember anything at all, whether it seems insignificant or not?"
"No." The word was harsh, and Albus flinched, but said nothing. He had misused Remus' trust, no matter that it was unwitting.
"I am sorry, Remus," Albus murmured, and left.
"It smelled like the girl from this evening," Remus whispered to the empty room. If he expected something, he was disappointed. The portraits continued to sleep, and the embers of the fire radiated little heat and left the room in shadow.
He stood and returned to his rooms.
"And this," said Eriol with a grand sweep of his arm, is our bedroom."
"It's an office," Tomoyo deadpanned, looking around at the mess of papers and folders."
"Actually it's an off-shoot of the Room of Records. Probably where workers or whoever go to review the files or something. It's not much, and it's damn near uncomfortable. There aren't any bedrooms in this building, and the couches are quite lumpy and just plain dirty."
Tomoyo snickered. "Spoken like a true, pompous aristocrat."
"I beg to differ," Eriol sniffed. "I just have high standards. Anyway, most employees leave around 8:00, so we can move about more freely in the night."
"Good," said Tomoyo decisively. "I'll keep more or less the same hours as at home."
"You're an insomniac?" he asked before remembering that she was from a different time zone.
"Never mind."

"Where are you going to get the things on Sakura's list?" Tomoyo asked curiously.
"I thought I'd go to Chinatown tomorrow. It's the easiest place to get what she needs, outside of
the Magic District. Would you like to come with me?" he offered.
"If you don't need me here, I'd love to go," Tomoyo replied happily.

"Have you ever been to a Magic District?" Eriol asked curiously, settling down on the floor, and
shifting various papers to the side.

"Once," Tomoyo replied, neatly stacking the papers in her way into a pile before settling herself
on one of Eriol's spare air mattresses he and Syaoran had been sleeping on. Syaoran had borrowed
the other one since he had been planning on camping out before officially infiltrating the Death
Eater camp. "I went with Sakura and Syaoran to the one in China."

"The oldest and most famous, created by the sorcerer Chang T'sao," Eriol commented, fiddling
with a small, milky, spherical stone on a gold chain he had taken from his pocket.

"That's why we didn't go to the Magic District in Japan," Tomoyo said. "Syaoran decided to take
Sakura and myself there for our first time, and he needed some more supplies for his mage kit. It
was wonderful. . ."
"But?" Eriol asked, hearing something in her voice.
"Well, I decided to go off by myself, and agreed to meet the two of them where we'd first come in.
There were some pretty crystals I wanted to buy. The store owner talked to me while ringing the
things up. I paid in cash since I couldn't perform any sort of magical service, and she asked who I
came with. I guess she could tell I wasn't a spellcaster. So I told her I'd come with Sakura-chan
and Syaoran-kun.

"She got really still, and I was wondering whether something was wrong when she asked what
their last names were."
"I said, 'Their names are Kinomoto Sakura and Li Syaoran, and I'm Daidouji Tomoyo. Pleased to
meet you.'"

"The whole shop was silent, and I wondered what was wrong. Then they all started kowtowing at
me and the shopkeeper refused to let me pay despite the fact that I had plenty of money, because I
was a close friend of the Card Mistress and the future head of the Li clan."

Tomoyo could feel herself blushing at the memory.

"It was so uncomfortable. I've never experienced anything like it. She wouldn't let me free until
she'd piled my arms high with many gifts for the three of us. Sakura told me that she and Syaoran
had gotten a similar reception. She'd introduced herself before Syaoran could warn her. He said
they probably would have recognized them eventually anyway."

Eriol could no longer contain his laughter and convulsed in a paroxysm of nearly silent mirth,
trying to keep any workers in the building from hearing him.

"Would you like to go to the Magic District as well?" Eriol asked finally. "You sounded as if you
liked it, apart from the kowtowing and free gifts." He chuckled before he could help himself, and
then quickly pulled himself back together. "The one in England is much newer and smaller than
the ones in east Asia, but it's easier to find more of the items than in even an occult shop."

"I'd love to," Tomoyo said, clasping her hands together. She remembered all of the different types
of fabric and different characteristics woven into the cloth and laughed to herself, hoping that there
was one like that here. "Oh ho ho ho. I can make true wizard robes for my Sakura-chan."

Eriol grinned. "Oh, before I forget, I want you to wear this." He gave her the amulet he'd been
toying with.

"What does it do?" Tomoyo asked as she fastened it around her neck.

"It's like a substitute for magic, I suppose," Eriol struggled to explain. "I put some of my power
into that stone, and it will enable you to perform spells. I won't always be around to make you
invisible when you need to be. I figured this was the best solution. For the small scale spells you'll
need, all you have to do is will it to happen."
Throughout Eriol's explanation Tomoyo's eyes had been growing larger and larger until she could contain herself no longer. She tackled him and squeezed him around the middle. "Domo arigatou gozaimashita," she said fervently.
"You're quite welcome," Eriol said with an amused grin, "but I would like to remind you that I already have a girlfriend."
"Gomen," she apologized, sitting up. "Is this permanent?"
Eriol shook his head. "When we're done here, I need to reclaim my magic or I'll stay at 2/3 my power. And we can't just give magic to anyone either. You're one of the few lucky ones who get to experience magic they weren't born into."
"I'll never forget this," Tomoyo said fervently. Noticing his rather alarmed look she added, "And I won't forget that you're engaged either."
She giggled at his look of relief.
"Where's Kerberos?" Eriol asked suddenly, looking around to see if he could spot the small creature.
"He left to go see Sakura as soon as we got out of the sewers," said Tomoyo. "Something about checking up on her."
"Poppy, that's just cruel," Albus informed her. He'd arrived in his office to find the medi-witch already waiting for him with three potions lined up on his desk. He'd assumed she'd forgotten.
"Giving me the false hope that I wouldn't be doing this, and then crushing my hopes under your heel and smearing them into the carpet."
"Really Albus, stop being so melodramatic. You're beginning to sound like a child. You need these, and I decided to save your dignity by doing this in private. You're too pale, and don't think I didn't notice you nodding off during Binns' lecture when you're usually able to at least keep your eyes open," Poppy told him. "Now drink up."
Dumbledore wondered how in the world he was going to get out of this one.
"I thank you for going above and beyond the call for medi-witchcraft, and I assure you that I will take these immediately after I finish this report. As there's no need for you to wait so long, and I'm sure you have patients that need tending to - "
"Either you drink those, or I'm forcing you back to the Infirmary," Madam Pomfrey interrupted sternly.
He made a face, and quickly swallowed the potions.
Poppy left with a smile on her face. Minerva was right, she thought, suppressing a chuckle. Ordering about our infallible Headmaster is extremely satisfying.
Syaoran stared unblinking into the small campfire, mesmerized by the ever-changing flames. He'd always been fascinated by the element and its 'double-edged blade' that could both kill and heal, burn and warm. He supposed the double nature was true of all of the elements, but fire was the most fierce.
Wood crackled and flames flared up before once more shrinking down. Fire never stopped moving. It was capricious and loyal only to a certain extent.
Fire was at the heart of every human, at the very heart of the army of Light, and if that flame ever died then there was no belief or faith behind the movement. When that flame of hope stilled, there was no winning.
If he and Sakura and Eriol and Tomoyo and the guardians, even, could not become that flame in the hearts of Albus Dumbledore's army (for it was really under him that most wizards and witches rallied under) then Voldemort would win and the conflict would leak into the Muggle world until they were drowning in chaos as well. Sorcerers were the more powerful, yes, but they also had the least numbers, and if this dark tide truly got going before they could defeat this Dark Wizard, then the sorcerers and spellcasters and Muggles would have a full scale crisis on their hands.
They were tiptoeing around this war, unsure of how and when to act, and what the consequences would be. They knew next to nothing about wizard-kind, and without knowledge they were at a disadvantage.
Wavering images appeared in the fire, a multitude of men and women dressed in black clashing
with men and women in white until the colors mixed together and blurred to become blood red . . .
Syaoran blinked, and shook his head. The fire was simply fire. There was no blood.
He grinned wryly at how abstract his thoughts had become. And morbid, he added.
A twig snapped somewhere in the woods to his left, and he immediately began cursing himself as
he rolled behind a large tree, the darkness suddenly pitch black after staring into the fire.
Syaoran blinked rapidly as he berated himself for being a fool. He'd been trained for this since he
was three, for the love of God, and the first time it needed to be put to actual use it had failed. One
of the basic rules when camping on guard in the dark was to avoid looking in the fire.
Otherwise you wouldn't be able to see anything hiding in the night.
He could barely make out the figure of a man about his size walking directly toward his campfire.
His legs tensed, preparing to leap as it came closer and closer. Almost . . .
Syaoran leaped and tackled the person, both of them landing heavily on the ground.
"Hiiragizawa?!!" exclaimed Syaoran in surprise.
Eriol grunted and wheezed, his breath having been knocked out of him.
It was rather satisfying for Syaoran to have the upper hand. He lingered on Eriol's stomach for a
bit longer than was strictly necessary before standing, 'accidentally' digging his knee into Eriol's
gut. After several moments of hesitation he extended a hand to help Eriol up.
He stood rather painfully, and leaned heavily on Syaoran as they made their way closer to the
campfire.
"Isn't it a bit late to be paying house calls?" Syaoran asked dryly, checking his watch. Only 3:15?
I could have sworn I'd been awake for longer than 10 minutes.
"You couldn't sleep either?" Eriol asked after catching his breath.
Syaoran looked at him sharply. "I woke up around 3:00," was all he said.
Eriol stared at his hands and sighed. "I've been having nightmares," he said in a rare moment of
vulnerability. "I'm back there again, feeling flesh tear beneath my talons, and blood stick to my
feathers. Their screams up close . . . When I woke up I was covered in tiny black feathers. I didn't
want to bother Tomoyo, so I came here."
Syaoran didn't say anything, remembering the night before when he had woken clawing at his
blankets to exchange looks with Eriol, who was already awake. It was lucky that neither of them
were given to yelling in their sleep.
"I . . ." He stopped abruptly and changed what he had been about to say. "I hope to God that
Sakura doesn't have similar nightmares by the time we're through with this." He paused, and
added, "Shouldn't Tomoyo be up now, though? She hasn't had time to adjust to this time zone."
"I think she was just tired from her flight. I expect she'll be up soon, skimming through what
we've found so far."
Syaoran curled up in his sleeping bag, leaving Eriol to stare into the fire. No more words were
needed, and Syaoran eventually slipped into a more peaceful sleep.
When he woke the next morning the fire was down to burning embers, and Eriol was long gone.
"King to E5."
He found himself staring at a chessboard. There was a tinkle of shattering glass, and his queen
was destroyed. Only two pieces remained on the board, facing each other.
For the first time Albus Dumbledore looked up to see his opponent. The person was dressed in
flowing gray robes, the hood pushed up to hide his or her - or its? - face. Was it a Death Eater?
Voldemort himself? He would've thought they would dress in black though. If it was an ally,
would he not be dressed in some brighter color? And why would he battle an ally, or why would
he hide his face in the first place?
"Who are you?" he asked.
The robed figure remained silent for so long, Albus thought he would receive no answer. Then a
woman's voice, low and emotionless, emerged from beneath the hood.
"Your move."
Dumbledore returned his gaze to the game. He didn't know why he hesitated. Her king was
directly in front of his. All barriers were gone, it was king versus king, and it was his turn. A sure
win.
He opened his mouth to speak. “King . . .?” His voice died off when his opponent's king took on his own face, which quickly morphed into Minerva's, Harry's, the young Mr. Weasley's and then his sister, Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy. Faces of witches and wizards both known and unknown to him paraded across the other king's face.

Forfeit, Dumbledore realized. I have to forfeit. Lose or lose. There was no way he could win. To his horror, unable to stop himself, he found himself saying, “King to E5.”

The game board warped into a spiraling blackness. Something exploded and he clapped his hands to his ears. He'd won, and in winning had lost. Movement caught his attention, and he looked up in time to see his opponent remove her hood.

A girl, he saw in surprise. Only a girl.

Her short brown hair floated in a breeze, and emerald eyes studied him sadly. Another chessboard rose up between them, and a game commenced unlike any he'd seen before as three armies took up position, one white, one silver, and one gold. The more aggressive pieces met in the center, while those refusing to participate hovered on the outside. A hump appeared in the middle, and the pieces slowly disappeared, as the chessboard became the Earth. Lights flashed and clashed all over the world.

“It was our choice in the end,” the girl said. He jumped, having forgotten she was there. “And we can change it if we're strong enough, fast enough, between the last choosing and the beginning of this new game. But if you want the first game to end, you will have to make the same risk.”

“I don't understand,” said Albus, and then he woke up.

The girl's features had already slipped his mind as he wrote down his dream. As he closed his eyes, Albus realized that there was no putting it off. He'd have to see his great-great-great grandmother's people in the morning.

Harry wiped the sweat off his face with a towel as he paced back and forth in front of the Great Hall, waiting for his friends to catch up. Today's conditioning class had been particularly strenuous, having to run around the castle 10 times in under an hour, and however tall the castle appeared, it was no less wide. He had been one of the first ones done, and waved limply to his panting schoolmates as they passed him into the school. Ron and Malfoy were among the last ones done.

“That's it,” Draco wheezed as he collapsed to the ground. “I'm registering a complaint to the school board. Getting up at an ungodly hour to do this is cruel and unusual punishment, and I will not stand for it.” His haughty tone of voice was ruined by the fact that his words came out in between great gasps.

“That's what you say every time,” Ginny commented, unimpressed.

“Stand up,” Hermione ordered, “and walk around, or the acid will build up.”

“Thank you for enlightening me, Granger,” he snapped, getting to his feet and brushing himself off. “I would never have known otherwise.”

Hermione shrugged his bad attitude off, and turned her back on him, dumping the contents of her water bottle over her head. Ron and Harry glared at the blond.

“At least you're in the best shape of your life,” Ginny pointed out. “That was the whole point of adding this class at the beginning of the year. If you need to run, you can't falter. If you need to cast one more spell, you'll have the energy to see it through.”

“Yes Professor,” said Malfoy snidely.

Ginny dumped her water bottle over his head and stalked into the school, ignoring his yelp of shock and wailings about his hair.

By the time Malfoy was through showering and had entered the Great Hall, the other four were already there, crowded around the day's issue of the Daily Prophet. He honestly had no idea why they insisted on reading that wet rag. Weasley was the only one to glance up when he passed. The male one, he meant.

"Anything interesting?” he drawled in an I-couldn't-care-less voice.

To his surprise, Neville was the one to answer. The boy usually ended up dropping or knocking over anything near him when Draco was around.

"There was an attempt on the American President's life, as well as the American ambassador."
Neville's face twisted into an uncharacteristic sneer, which really wasn't much as far as sneers went, and was far from intimidating on Longbottom's face. It did serve to get the message across when he said, "Our Minister added another couple of Aurors to his personal bodyguard, which means less Aurors for fieldwork. Even with the groups from America, Japan, China, Russia, and the rest of Europe, we don't have any Aurors to waste."

"Voldemort," collective shudder, pause, glare (it was rather like clockwork), "wouldn't dare attack Fudge," Harry said dryly. "We might actually replace him with someone competent."

Everyone had quickly learned to detest the bumbling Fudge, and how he was constantly interfering with the plans to battle the Dark Lord. There wasn't any time to replace Fudge either, so they got on as best as they could, and hoped none of the other countries' leaders and ambassadors would be irrevocably insulted.

Malfoy paused for a bit longer, his brain whirring through all of the possibilities this attack could mean. President Donald was pretty good as leaders went. Hermione often commented that more women needed to govern. He doubted the attempt on Carrie Donald's life would have her withdrawing the Aurors. It was a scare tactic. Like a dog marking its territory, You-Know-Who was showing her that not even the leader of one of the most powerful countries in the world was safe here. Draco snickered at the thought of Voldemort marking a tree.

"What?" demanded Harry.

"Nothing," he replied smoothly, and was heading over to the Slytherin table when Hermione tugged at his robes, bringing him up short. "Yes?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Does McGonagall seem different to you?" she asked in a low voice.

Draco looked at the teacher's table. She looked like she always did to him. "I wouldn't know," he replied matter-of-factly. He rarely paid attention to professors, aside from their lectures. He had no idea what was normal and what wasn't. "See you in Care of Magical Creatures."

Hermione let him go, and chewed on her thumbnail, brow furrowed in thought. As Draco settled himself in between Crabbe and Goyle, pretending not to notice the murderous looks several members of his House were sending him - he could take care of himself - he saw Granger shoot surreptitious looks at the Teacher's table all during breakfast. He wondered if he should be concerned. Hermione was generally right, after all. Then he decided not to worry.

After all, Dumbledore wouldn't let an agent of You-Know-Who into the school would he.

Dumbledore stood to announce that Flying Lessons were cancelled due to Madam Hooch having become ill, and added that reminders were posted in all House Commons.

Then again, remembered Draco, there had been that little matter of You-Know-Who being stuck to the back of Quirrell's head in First Year, and the Chamber of Secrets in Second Year, and the insane mass murderer Black in Third Year before anyone knew he wasn't a mass murderer, though the insane part was still in question, and the . . .

Sakura didn't awaken until two in the afternoon. A quick check told her that her magic was back to normal, and the opal drained of stored energy. She ransacked her food bag, and cleaned it out, delicately licking her fingers clean of any crumbs. Then she argued with herself about whether to stick with her plan or not.

But after seeing how the school fought and functioned, she knew it had to be done. She also knew that her inner clock would be severely screwed.

And after all, she figured, how much can I miss in just one day?

Sakura had to make a wand for herself. And it couldn't be a normal one that she sometimes used to help cast spells. It had to be a wizard wand, but she had to make it herself, since normal ones refused to work for her. There were many downsides to this, but she couldn't think of another way to do it.

Witches and wizards had only to pronounce the words of the spell and move the wand correctly. The wand would amplify the power. They still couldn't discern where the power came from, since they apparently had a small natural store of magickal energy.

Sakura's wizarding wand, however, could only cast the spell if she understood the structure of the spell. This meant that she had to study other witches and wizards perform the spell, perhaps multiple times, before she herself could do it. Happily, she could forget the structure, but the wand
would remember after only one casting.
Before she could forget, Sakura ran to get a bowl of water, and returned in record time. Then she
rummaged through her backpack for her mage kit, and stirred sea salt into the water. She placed
the opal into the mixture to cleanse it before its next use.
After that was done, she felt along the sides of the bag, feeling for the slightly softer piece of fabric
that marked where she kept the more rare and dangerous tools. Rubbing it between her fingers,
she murmured an incantation under her breath. The cloth disappeared, and she reached into an
alternate space for her small ritual dagger.
Sakura wrinkled her nose and held her breath, hating this part. She slid the knife across her palm,
and clenched her hand into a fist, thumb pointing upward. The larger magicks required blood to
power the spell. To keep the power from corrupting, the gods had made it so that only the caster's
own blood would work. An animal or human sacrifice would not work, and might very well kill
the spellcaster.
The law of gravity warped, and blood dripped both towards the ground and towards the ceiling,
stopping a few inches away from her hand. The red liquid seemed to become clearer and harder.
The color dulled to mahogany, and suddenly a wand was clenched in Sakura's hand. She checked
her palm and found a puckered scar. The dagger was clean and free of blood.
"I hope this works," Sakura said faintly, and promptly passed out.
As soon as the morning classes were under way, Albus sent a note to Severus, informing him that
he would be gone until the afternoon, and, yes, this was a necessary trip and one he couldn't put
off any longer. He didn't tell the Potions Master where he was going or why, and Albus hoped in
vain that he wouldn't take it out on his classes. Severus would probably curse Albus for leaving
when his Deputy was gone as well, and leaving him in charge if there was an emergency.
That done, he became invisible and used an illegal portkey to reach the western Scottish coast.
With a graceful twirl of his cloak he disappeared and reappeared in a dense green forest clearing.
A large hill stood before him, and as he began walking the light became steadily brighter, and the
colors seemed to warp and twist. A large group of tall people appeared in the distance, standing
behind a silver throne.
Albus drew near, and knelt before the Tuatha de Danaan.
"Rise Albus Dumbledore," said the queen, and he stood, watching her face, but not daring to meet
her eyes. "If you have come to ask our assistance in your war, we refuse. You should know that
we do not often concern ourselves with the affairs of the mortal realm."
"What about the Seelie Court?" he asked, guessing the answer before she spoke.
"They will not help you anymore than they have. It is the choice of individual species whether to
assist you or not. They don't dare provoke the Unseelie Court as long as they do not officially side
with Tom Riddle. There is something else that troubles you. Speak."
So he told her of his dream, and waited while she pondered on the meaning.
"Did your own king change identities?" she asked at last.
"I believe so, although I only saw the back of my piece," he replied.
The Queen of the Faerie was silent once more, and her eyes flickered to something behind Albus.
He half-turned, but saw nothing.
"I don't believe that the focus of the dream pertained to this war, as you've guessed. It is something
that will be decided at some point after the defeat of Riddle. I do not know what the choice is
about, nor what will follow."
"Do you know who the girl is?" Dumbledore pressed.
"I cannot say."
He was about to comment that this was not the same as not knowing, but was sidetracked by what
the Fae did next. At some unnoticed signal, the crowd behind the throne parted to let two Fae
forward, both carrying long... things wrapped in beautiful, unearthly fabrics.
"Your thrice great grandmother was among my closest retainers before she chose mortality, as you
know."
Albus nodded. He had inherited an unusually long life and stronger powers from her. He was too
far removed to be endowed with anything else, and truth to tell, he was happy with what he had.
“So I will gift you with two objects that have been missing from mortal realms for centuries. They are not meant to be used for the war, but I gather you will have need of them in the future.” She nodded, and the objects were unwrapped. The woman held a large, dark recurved bow, with the string coiled around the wood. The man carried a long glaive, one and a half times tall as Dumbledore.

For a moment he simply stared, unable to believe what was before his eyes. They had thought these weapons lost forever, and the Tuatha de Danaan had possessed them this whole time.

“I believe,” she said, a hint of amusement evident in her voice, “that the sword and the dagger both reside in the Sorting Hat?”

“Gryffindor's sword was pulled from the hat five years ago,” Albus corrected. “Hufflepuff’s dagger is still there.”

The queen lifted her arm, fingers outstretched, at the weapons. They disappeared in a ball of light, and he gave her a curious, half-fearful look.

“Don't worry,” she said calmly. “I simply sent them to your office. Fawkes, I believe, is watching over them. You may go.”

He bowed at this clear dismissal, and turned to leave. He was brought up short by the sight of a young man with blue-black hair and eyes to match behind round spectacles. He was dressed in strange blue robes and a hat, leaning on a golden staff and regarding him with an unreadable enigmatic smile. “Good day, Albus Dumbledore,” he greeted in a cultured, aristocratic tone.

“Good day,” Dumbledore responded amiably, wondering how this boy was affiliated with the Tuatha de Danaan. He knew better than to linger behind, though, and strode off slowly.

“I came as soon as the sylph arrived, Your Majesty,” he overheard.

"Then the debt is repaid, Eriol Hiiragizawa?”

The reply was rather sour and the slightest bit peevish. “You could have told us about his kind long before now.”

Dumbledore paused and straightened. 'His kind?' He only managed to hear the queen laugh and say, “Even for your kind, we do not interfere when unnecessary.” Then the world became a swirl of color and he was forced to close his eyes or suffer a migraine. He opened them to an abandoned hilltop, and indulged himself just once, to kick at a rock in frustration, before composing himself and returning to Scotland with a swirl of his cloak.

"I apologize for leaving so suddenly," Eriol said as he returned to Tomoyo’s side in the north end of the Magic District. He did a double-take at the bolts of fabric she carried.

"That's all right. We are in the middle of an emergency," Tomoyo replied agreeably. "You should have warned me of the commotion being associated with you would cause. Although in hindsight the half-reincarnation of Clow Reed would be rather well-known. That disguise combined with the lack of your presence threw them off."

"Allow me to help you," Eriol offered hesitantly. "I've had my break and am ready to face the world once more." He paused, and then added, "As long as the world is not uphill."

"It is," Tomoyo confirmed dryly nodding in the direction of the square that was used specifically for teleporting.

"Curses," Eriol muttered. He was rather thankful and the slightest bit offended that she let him carry only three bolts of fabric. "You should start conditioning with Syaoran," she commented with an innocent, 'o ho ho ho.'

"That'd be the death of me," he said, highly offended.

"Where were you, anyway?"

"The Queen of the Tuatha de Danaan summoned me with a sylph of air. You probably know the Tuatha de Danaan as the Fae or elves," he added at her confused expression.

Tomoyo looked delighted. "Sakura never mentioned them."

"They only live in the land of the Celts," he responded. "And they like to keep to themselves." He frowned peevishly. "They didn't even tell me of the existence of wizards and witches. Anyway, she had a visitor of some interest that she thought I would like to see. But it wasn't very informative, except for the fact that Albus Dumbledore is distantly related to the Fae, and he has prophetic dreams."
"That's something, I suppose," Tomoyo commented serenely. He listened politely as Tomoyo spent the rest of the walk talking about the different characteristics of each fabric (i.e. protection, warmth, invisibility, etc.), and how she would design each robe. Upon returning to Hogwarts, Albus sent Severus a note, letting him know that he was back and requesting his presence at his earliest convenience. Then he settled in his chair, and stared at Slytherin's glaive and Ravenclaw's bow, wondering what on earth he was going to do with them. He grinned suddenly, looking forward to seeing Severus, despite the fact that he was probably still a bit put out.

He checked the clock. Time between the two worlds was slightly out of sync. Severus' planning period began in fifteen minutes, and dinner was after that. They should have plenty of time to figure out what to do.

Not for the first time he wished Minerva were still here, but he didn't dare call her back now, and they needed what information they could get.

Severus Snape entered the room some time later in a righteous fury at Albus' irresponsibility and abandoning of the school, and stopped short at the sight of his innocent smile, which was more reminiscent of a cat that caught the canary. He sat down warily at the Headmaster's invitation, tension visible despite his voluminous robes. "What are you up to?" he asked suspiciously. In his opinion he had every right to be suspicious. Albus loved to catch everyone off guard in general, and Severus in particular.

"Severus, why must you think I am 'up to something'?"

His lip curled. "Because you usually are. And you also left the castle with no explanation. And no, 'I must visit my great-great-grandmother's people' is not a sufficient excuse."

"Great-great-great grandmother, actually," Albus corrected. "If you really must know, I have recovered Slytherin's glaive and Ravenclaw's bow. Sherbert lemon?" He passed the tin to Severus.

He tried to pass the tin of Muggle candy back. "No, Albus, do I ever - " His mind processed what had been said, and yellow candies hit the floor in a clatter.

"Really, Severus," Dumbledore frowned. "You needn't waste my candy."

"You... Merlin's beard, Albus. You found the glaive and bow?!"

The Headmaster was enjoying this immensely. "Yes. My three times great grandmother's employer had them."

"Your..." He trailed off. "Who?" he asked weakly.

"Well, I really shouldn't be saying this, but I trust you will not be spreading this information around. My great-great-great grandmother Eriu was a retainer of the Queen of the Tuatha de Danaan. I occasionally pay my respects to her. She said we shouldn't use these in the war though."

"Where are they?" the Potions Master asked faintly.

"Over there." He nodded over to where Fawkes was perched on the glaive, cocking his head at the blade as if admiring his reflection. "I was wondering where you thought we should hide them."

Severus considered for a moment before suggesting the most concealed place he could think of.

"The Chamber of Secrets."

Albus' eyes lit up. "Oh, wonderful idea. Should we move Gryffindor's sword as well?"

Severus shrugged. "It can't hurt. No one pays much attention to it, so no one will miss it."

"You look over your shock," Dumbledore commented.

Merlin curse the man, he actually sounded disappointed.

It was ridiculously easy to spy on Death Eaters, Syaoran reflected. Especially if they all insisted on wearing bulky black robes and masks. No one knew everyone, except for perhaps the Dark Lord whatsisname. Vole-something or other. All he had to do was cringe, follow orders, and curse a bit about what a waste of space Muggles, Mudbloods, and all things prone to prejudice were. He'd used the day to get his bearings, and explore the camp, but he could find only tents housing the large numbers of Death Eaters. He hadn't been able to find any prisoners.

By the time darkness had fallen, Syaoran had figured out where the higher-ranking officials slept...
in a group of tents. He hadn't yet dared go through anything inside until he had time to manipulate
the layers of protective spells.
A sharp crack startled him, and three figures in robes and masks appeared in the clearing floating a
family of five bound and gagged, eyes glazed with panic and pain and disbelief. It's a nightmare,
their eyes cried out. Please let this not be real. Everyone in the camp immediately crowded around
the group, clamoring to be the first. They did not say what they wanted to be the first for, but
Syaoran could easily guess, and was thankful that his newly acquired mask hid his sickened
expression.
"We found these Muggles nosing around the mountain, and thought a bit of entertainment
wouldn't go amiss," said the tall man cruelly. "I've softened them up a bit. Who's next?"
A roar of voices shouted eagerly for the privilege, and Syaoran's brain worked furiously as the
mother and two daughters were doled out among the men, clothes being ripped apart. The father
and son roared, but the wizard backhanded them, and easily broke the son's fingers when he
screamed out curses. Clothes were quickly being torn, and Syaoran decided that there was no help
for it. Without moving a muscle, he teleported the family to Hogwarts castle.
There was a shocked silence, and then cries for the blood of the traitor who had taken away their
entertainment.
"Quiet you imbeciles!" the man - obviously the leader - hissed. "Apparition Priori Incantatem."
Nothing happened, or at least nothing that Syaoran could see.
"Uh... Nothing happened, Sumner" muttered one of the original three.
"I know that, fool!" he snapped. "Bring out our oldest prisoner. Let's see if our bleeding heart
dares to risk himself again."
Syaoran clenched his fists and forced himself to count to 10. Then 20. Then 30.
A feral shriek caught his attention and he sucked in his breath when he caught sight of what two
burly wizards brought between them, seemingly out of a tree trunk. The man was tortured, and
mad with pain. His clothes hung on his gaunt body in tatters, streaked with blood and dirt and
vomit. He was no more than skin and bone, and Syaoran could easily count his ribs. He clawed at
the wizards who held him with crooked, broken fingers.
Syaoran itched to free the man, but his practical side screamed that it was too late, and best to
preserve his cover. Who knew what tactics the Death Eaters would use to smoke him out?
He almost retched as they applied red-hot metal to skin, the acrid smell lingering in his nostrils,
and he knew without a doubt that he would never be able to save the man. But, he realized, he
could put him out of his pain.
God of Death, save this man, and gather his soul to your warm embrace.
The prisoner went limp, eyes staring blankly at the night sky. The men cursed their bad luck and
brought out another of their victims. The next one was young boy, not nearly so far gone as the
one who came before.
They were trying to draw him out, Syaoran knew, and his hands clenched into fists. He trembled
with anger, but the crowd around him was so filled with blood-lust that they did not notice. This
one he would save once he saw what they had in mind, screw the consequences.
The Death Eaters bound the boy to a cross, in a grim parody of the Christian Jesus, and then stood
back. Were they going to burn him? Syaoran wondered. That would give him plenty of time to
rescue the boy.
The leader - Sumner - waved his wand and murmured under his breath. A horizontal cut appeared
on the boy's shirt. Then he realized that it went deeper than than that and he stumbled away,
barely having the presence of mind to spell them to keep from noticing as the boy's guts tumbled
to the ground, the intestine still attached to a place inside his stomach.
He leaned against a tree and vomited, the boy's screams ringing in his ears, and accusation. He
clutched his head and moaned as he heaved again and again and again. Tears ran down his face,
but he paid them no heed, I could have saved him, echoing inside his mind.
Syaoran wasn't ready for this. His training hadn't included the kind of evil that fed on blood and
pain and torture. He'd had his doubts before, but no longer. He would see this whole thing
through to the end if it killed him.
When Sakura woke for the second time that day it was after dinner and the shadows were lengthening outside. She spent a moment putting away her ceremonial dagger, and then leaned with her back against the wall, studying her wand. It was dark and smooth, the color of dried blood. She gave a few experimental waves, and then attempted one of the spells she’d remembered seeing another student practice.

“Wingardium leviosa.”
Nothing happened. Sakura sighed, not really surprised, and stood, stretching and blinking the grittiness from her eyes. Her stomach growled and she was searching for food before remembering that she’d eaten it all.

“Another trip to the Kitchen,” she muttered, wincing at the last visit. It was uncomfortable ordering creatures around that acted as if they existed solely for obeying orders. Last time she’d asked for a meal and gotten a feast. Maybe this time she’d ask for a snack and get dinner.
The Kitchen was once more a flurry of activity. She was accosted by house-elves at every turn and when asked for a snack was given steak, pasta salad, fruit, and a glass of pumpkin juice, which she avoided. Throughout her dinner she was asked time and time again her opinion on several dishes. She barely managed to escape the liver and onion dish.

On her return to her room she was attacked by a small yellow creature and barely managed to stifle her shriek when she realized that it was Kero.

“Kero-chan!” she whispered in delight, and hugged him until he turned blue.

“Hey, kiddo. How ya doin’?” he asked gruffly.

“Fine. Lately, every time I gain back my magic I use it again, but that shouldn’t happen much anymore. Would you do me a favor and act as the messenger between me, Eriol, and Syaoran?”

“What!”

“Shhh,” Sakura hissed, looking around to make sure no one was near.

“You expect me to be a messenger?” he asked indignantly. “I am Keroberos, Sun Guardian of the Seal!”

“But Kero-chan,” she said slyly. “This is something only you can do.”

That made him pause.

“Just think of all the sweets you’ll get flying from person to person. And, Spinel is stuck reading books about wizards.”

“But he likes that kind of thing,” Kero said weakly. Sakura just waited, giving him her most innocent smile. “All right,” he broke down. “I’ll do it.”

“Arigatou, Kero-chan. I’ll go back down to the Kitchens for pudding, and then we can head back to my room.”

Kero cheered up considerably at this prospect.

Nearly 20 minutes later she had summoned parchment, ink, and quill, and sat at a desk in the corner of her room. Kero was happily spooning up his fourth helping of pudding. Sakura growled in frustration as the ink blotted yet again. Apparently there was an art to writing with a quill.

Finally satisfied, she signed her name and frowned at her messy scrawl. The ink was thick in some places and nearly nonexistent in others. Some of the more complicated kanji had represented nothing more than a blob. She’d had to redo those again, sometimes three times before getting it right.

Both letters – one to Syaoran, the other to Eriol – contained everything she’d learned about wizards from Lupin. She especially stressed the spell that no sorcerer could block or break, and how no one knew what exactly it did. Remus had also said something about the spell being used in other stories without sorcerers to get wizards out of tight situations in myths. Then she told Eriol to have Spinel come stay at Hogwarts. The library was huge, and everything pertained to witches and wizards. He could get a lot more work done there.

Finally satisfied, she told Kero he could stay until morning if he wanted.

“Where are you going?” he asked sleepily after she showed him where the letters were.

“Outside. I think I’m going to go flying. Maybe I’ll find the nearest pay phone and call Otousan. I’ve been feeling a little home sick lately.”

“Okay. Be careful,” he murmured.
“Hai. Ja ne, Kero-chan.”
“Where’s Katie gone off to?” asked Marge of the occupants of the safe house for people targeted by Voldemort. “She hasn’t gone outside, has she? The wards won’t protect her outside the house.”
“I’m sure she’s fine,” Kevin, her husband, reassured her. “Probably playing hide and seek with the kids.
Daniel didn’t look reassured, and glanced at the Floo powder by the fireplace. He did a double-take. “What happened to the Floo powder?” he asked.
The three adults looked at each other. Something wasn’t right here. Something was very very wrong.
There was a knock at the door, and Marge smiled in relief. “That must be Katie. We’ll ask her.” She opened the door, and all hell broke loose.
Death Eaters streamed into the house, killing the four downstairs immediately. Sarah, nearly 9 months pregnant and about to head downstairs rushed back up and grabbed the first child she could find, who happened to be Rhiannon.
“Get in the secret closet. You know the password. Don’t come out until I tell you, understand?” she hissed, panic clear in her every stilted movement.
Rhiannon nodded, too stunned to cry and rushed off. Sarah ran to the bedroom to find the other children and nearly ran into Katie. “Death Eaters,” she informed her quickly. “Help me find the other children.”
Katie just stood there, and Sarah grabbed her arm, confused. “Hurry!”
“Too late,” said Katie with a smile. Raising her voice, she shouted, “Over here!”
Sarah stared in shock. What. . . ?
The first Death Eater carried a sword, and Sarah quickly pulled her wand and stunned him, before something slammed into her back. She shrieked and another Death Eater yelled, “Crucio.”
Sarah’s body spasmed, and she screamed in pain. Tears streamed down her face, and she could only murmur, “Not my baby, not my baby,” over and over again. The pain stopped and she glared cold hatred at Katie before a new pain began. They ripped her clothes off and held her flailing limbs down before taking turns.
Sarah screamed her throat raw, and when they were done, finally ran her through the stomach. She sobbed for her dead, unborn child and barely noticed when her wild magic burst from her, killing two of the seven Death Eaters there, along with Katie.
She died without having found out that she’d failed to save the other two children.
One of the wizards kicked her corpse as her bowels let loose. Blood trickled out of a corner of her mouth, and her eyes were closed. The strain of the death was evident in her tightened muscles.
“Trash. They won’t be disturbing our lord anymore,” muttered a Death Eater and they Apparated away, all spells and wards broken.
Sirens rang in the distance.
Sakura Kinomoto sighed and leaned back, enjoying the breeze as the sun set on the Scottish countryside. She then immediately scrambled to right herself, having yanked the borrowed broom up perpendicular to the ground. Her pulse raced at the near accident and her cheeks burned with embarrassment. She looked around furtively to make sure no one had seen such a beginner move, and glared death at a chicken-looking creature she was unfamiliar with. Either it was one of the more rare magic creatures, or – more likely – she’d slept through that particular lesson. The Card Mistress suddenly realized that she didn’t know how to stop a wizard’s broom. “Kuso,” she muttered darkly, and began experimenting. She pulled back gently, and succeeded only in slowly ascending. Frowning, she turned the handle first slightly to the left, and then slightly to the right. Still nothing. Sakura sat still, furrowing her brow in thought. Suddenly the broom began to buck violently, painfully whipping her neck back. She winced, and clung to the handle, forcing the broom closer to the ground so that she wouldn’t have such a distance to fall. It stopped just as suddenly as it had begun, and Sakura sagged forward, rubbing her sore neck. If that was a charm to keep the broom from flying too high, it was definitely faulty. That was what she got for stealing a school broom from the shed.
Fed up with the enchanted object she glared at it, and screamed mentally, STOP! To her surprise, it obeyed, and she hovered in midair, looking around to get her bearings. She could just see a small town to her right. She smiled. This one had no magic, so finding a payphone would be easy. It would be rather unusual to be carrying a broomstick, but she wasn’t about to let it go and lose it.

Sakura sped forward several more meters before alighting on the ground and walking the rest of the way. It was several blocks before she found a phone. Most of the denizens were in their homes, so the broom received few stares.

She shoved in a few coins that Eriol had exchanged for her, and dialed her home phone number. “Moshi moshi, Sakura-chan,” greeted her father immediately. She grinned. He’d gotten into the habit of using his magic to know who was calling.

“Konbanwa, Otousan,” she chirped, before remembering that it was a different time zone. “Ah! Gomen nasai! Did I wake you?”

“Hai,” he said sleepily, “but I’m glad you didn’t forget about me.”

“Of course not!” Sakura replied sheepishly. “I could try again later.”

“Iie. I’m already up. What have you been up to?”

She paled as the battle in front of Hogwarts surfaced in her mind, but quickly pushed it aside and decided not to mention it. “I found a Rithlan,” she said instead. “But she’s gone now.” Sakura could almost feel her father listening avidly as she described Orenda-san and how she had gone on, though not why. She continued on to talk about wizards and witches when she heard a strange click, and then – “KAIJUU!!”

She flinched and held the receiver away from her ear, still able to hear Touya clearly.

“ – THINK YOU’RE DOING?! DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU TELEPORTED ME?!”

“Ano – ”

“You dropped me TWO FLOORS above my room! I barely got out before its occupants returned, and that was only thank to Yuki!”

Sakura spared a moment to admire all of the detailed spell-work that must have gone into setting up a spell to tap into the phone line. Then she heard a scuffling and Yukito-san’s sleepy voice floated over the line. “Ohayo Kinomoto-san, Sakura-san. Gomen nasai, but I really should cancel this spell before Touya wakes the building.”

“Sayonara, Yukito-san!” Sakura said cheerfully.

“I should be going as well,” her father said regretfully. “I need to give a lecture in three and a half hours.”

She pouted, but said her good-byes, and headed back to Hogwarts. The whole trip had taken almost an hour, and when she returned she saw a Muggle family on the lawn, weary, scraped up, and confused. Several professors were attempting to calm them down, but the father and son were having none of it, hurling rocks in their direction.

Sakura quickly cast a notice-me-not charm and landed. Abandoning the broom, she ran closer, creeping up behind the family where the mother was holding a sobbing girl.

“Please calm down,” Professor Sprout was saying soothingly. “We mean you no harm.”

“No more of your hocus-pocus! You’re not touching my family!” the father snarled.

Each of the three professors had cast a shield charm around themselves and were moving closer to the Muggles. Sakura noticed that the Potions Professor – Snape? – had a cut on his cheek.

“Don’t come any closer,” said the boy hysterically, and grabbed a stout branch to swing at them.

“Listen to us,” said Snape calmly, attempting to be patient with them. Sakura was rather surprised at this, since he was one to be more cruel and biased. “The ones who attacked you were Death Eaters. We don’t know how you got through the wards onto Hogwarts’ grounds, but we only wish to help you.”

Sakura quickly pieced together the story and decided to take a chance before the Headmaster arrived. She cancelled the spell and grabbed the branch, stopping it in midair. “Shh,” she murmured soothingly, and stepped toward the mother and daughter, before the man could recover his wits. “They need help,” she said softly, touching the girl’s hair gently. “Your daughter needs
help, else she’ll be emotionally scarred for life.”
This stopped the father in his tracks, but the son was too far gone in his panic. He rushed at her, but she simply pivoted to the side and disappeared.
“Sleep and dream and forget for a while what happened before you injure yourself,” a voice whispered from everywhere and nowhere at all, and the boy fell to his knees, and then the ground, and slept.
Sakura watched in satisfaction from the cover of the forest as the family was helped into the castle. It didn’t escape her notice that the professors gripped their wands tightly and looked around often. Her lips curled upward. It was rather fun to confuse them. Then her grin became a smirk as she remembered the bulging eyes and dropped jaws. By the way Professor Snape had paled and stumbled backward, you would have thought she was the devil himself.
In fact, maybe they did think that, or something along those lines.
Sakura sighed absently and rested her chin in her hands. She had to be careful; it would be too easy to underestimate someone less powerful. Already, she didn’t dare to appear near the Headmaster of Hogwarts. And still, there were nagging voices in her head, whispering, telling her she should stop, that one girl could not make a difference in a full-scale war, no matter that she was the Card Mistress. It would be simple to tear the Wizarding World apart without meaning to. An icy wind jolted Sakura out of her thoughts and she realized that she was shivering uncontrollably and her fingers and toes were numb. Judging that a sufficient amount of time had passed for the halls to be cleared, she raced for the relative warmth of the castle, forgetting about the broom she had borrowed.

A large book slammed shut and the other two occupants of the Gryffindor Common Room jumped.
“Hermione,” Ron complained. “If you’re not going to do anything but make noise, go back to bed.”
The witch raised an eye at him. “And I suppose Exploding Snap counts as ‘doing something?’ Besides, the reason I got out of bed at midnight was because I couldn’t sleep.”
Harry yawned and took a card from the deck. “Fine. Map or Invisibility Cloak?”
“What?”
“If you don’t get enough sleep, we’re the ones who are going to suffer in the morning. Now go run off that energy or go ask Lupin about the essay, or something. Map or Cloak?” Harry explained patiently.
“Map,” she replied at last. She preferred to know if someone was coming than chance it while being invisible. “I need to get tomorrow’s homework from him, since I’ll be gone.”
“Where are you going?” asked Ron in surprise.
She stomped her foot in frustration. “Honestly, Ron, don’t you listen to a word I say?”
Ron had to bite back a ‘not really, we’ve learned to tune you out.’ He wasn’t clueless enough to think he would get away with it unscathed.
“I’m going to Hogsmeade to help with the last of the clean-up crew from the battle a few days ago. Draco’s signed up too. It’s been posted on the notice board,” she continued.
Ron blinked. “We have a notice board?”
Harry and Hermione rolled their eyes. “Next you’re going to say you didn’t know Hogwarts was located in Scotland,” she retorted sharply.
The red-haired wizard gave them an innocent look. “We’re in Scotland?”
Hermione sighed gustily as Harry grinned.
Before she knew it, the two of them had placed the Map in her hand and shoved her out the door, fairly slamming the portrait behind her and making the Fat Lady grumble. Hermione smiled and walked off after checking to make sure no one was around. They were worried about her, and she couldn’t get very angry at them for that. They probably wanted to go to bed as well. She knew they wouldn’t have stayed up for over half an hour playing Exploding Snap after midnight if she hadn’t been there, especially after their A(dvanced) P(otions) class. She was only required once a week, while they went twice and Neville anywhere from three to five times. Other members of the
Order attended as well as members of the DA, on a semi-regular basis.
Her eyes flicked over the parchment, searching for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It was empty. She quickly looked for Remus Lupin’s office, hoping he’d be there despite the late hour and smiled when his dot appeared at his desk.
Hermione walked briskly toward the fourth floor, and only had to dive into empty classrooms twice, the first to avoid Peeves, and the next to avoid Filch who was cursing under his breath about Peeves. Despite her Head Girl status, she knew they’d give her grief if she was caught.
The hallways were chilly, and she wrapped her robe more tightly around her body. She knocked quietly on the door and waited, but no one replied. Hermione checked the Marauder’s Map and confirmed that Professor Lupin was still there. Another knock received no answer, so she quietly pushed open the door to see if he was all right. At first glance he appeared to be sleeping with his head down, but upon closer examination she realized that he was sobbing silently into his arms.
Hermione hovered in the doorway, uncertain as to what to do. Would he want comfort or to be alone? She couldn’t stand to see the man so sad, though, so she walked over across from him and touched an arm lightly.
He jumped and his head shot up, tears glistening in his eyes and on his cheeks. “Hermione,” he said thickly, wiping his eyes with a sleeve. “What are you doing here so late?” That made her realize how out of it he was. He hadn’t called her ‘Hermione’ since the summer before; it had been Miss Granger all school year. Professor Lupin was something of a stickler about things like that.
“Thinking about the war?” she asked softly, instead.
His eyes took on a far away look and he shook his head. “The past.”
She nodded in understanding.
“Before all of this, when James, Sirius, Peter, and I had nothing more important to worry about than the next gag. Peter could be quite clever sometimes, you know. Not often enough to keep from being teased, but sometimes. . . . I just can’t see how everything could go so wrong in a few short years.”
Hermione listened to him silently.
“Nothing could touch us.”
He closed his eyes, forgetting that she was there. He tried to put himself back in his childhood, but it wouldn’t work. The details were too fuzzy, and when he returned to the present, the situation broke his heart all over again.
Hermione didn’t know what to do. She’d never seen him like this before. Professor Lupin had always been so calm and composed. She wasn’t sure what he was doing to himself was healthy, really.
Remus shook himself and brushed away the cobwebs of happier times. “Now,” he said calmly. “What did you need?”
It was a moment before she could gather her thoughts. “I’m going to be gone tomorrow, cleaning up Diagon Alley, you know, and I wondered if there was any homework that I needed to do?”
He thought for a moment before replying, “We’ll simply be reviewing acromantulas. I don’t have any written work planned.”
Hermione fought a grin at how Harry and Ron had been acting throughout the section on the giant arachnids. She noticed Remus watching her curiously.
“Did they ever tell you about their 2nd year?” she asked, desperately trying to keep from giggling like a maniac. “No? I’m surprised. Well, the two of them confirmed the rumors of a colony of acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest.” She sobered almost immediately. “Could’ve been killed, the two of them. Honestly. Harry said Ron nearly died of fright before they ever reached Aragog. Hagrid told them to follow the spiders, since he was being taken to Azkaban and I was Petrified. Idiots.”
Remus was torn between humor at finally understanding why the two Gryffindors were so jumpy, and fear at what could have happened to them. He decided not to do anything about it since it had been five years. It was rather soothing, actually, having Hermione simply talking to him.
“Anything else I should know about those two?” he asked with a small grin. Hermione thought for a moment and settled for the simple things. “I remember how shocked Ron was when he became captain of the Quidditch team. I think Harry may have minded a bit at first, but we all knew he would be too busy taking charge of the DA, not to mention having to take all those extra lessons, teaching DADA, and study for NEWTs. It was a good choice, though. That’s how we found out what a great strategist Ron was. Came from playing Wizard’s Chess when he should have been doing his homework.” Hermione sniffed disapprovingly. “Needless to say, he was delighted. Harry’s always complaining he’s a reincarnated Oliver Wood, and Ginny claims he’s a sadistic Quidditch maniac. Harry tells her it’s the same thing.”

She laughed and Remus joined her, happy to see how her eyes lit up with humor. They had been forced to grow old before their time, and it was painful to see the absentminded weariness in their manner. They hadn’t had much chance for a childhood, and it was good that they could still find something to laugh about.

Hermione yawned, and Remus gave a half-hearted chuckle. “It’s late,” he said in as normal a tone as he could manage. “We both need our rest.” “Mm,” Hermione agreed, and slipped the Map out of her pocket. The coast was clear so far, but there seemed to be an inordinate amount of people in the Infirmary. Several were professors, but there were four she didn’t know, and their dots were different, somehow. The scrip was faded, the print more block than cursive. “Professor? What does a Muggle look like on the Map?” she asked slowly. “Pardon?” He got up from behind his desk and stood next to her, studying the parchment. He frowned, and Hermione fixated her eyes on the Marauder’s Map with perhaps more attention than it was worth. “Why are Muggles in Hogwarts?” he wondered absently. “Go on,” Hermione told him as he straightened. “I’ll head back to the Tower.” She grinned at his hesitant look. “I swear on the Marauder’s Map.” Remus smiled back at her, his melancholy forgotten. “Much good that is.” “G’night, Moony,” Hermione said, grinning impishly before rounding the corner. “Good night,” he murmured, and strode off to the Hospital Wing.

Sakura hugged herself as she watched them take their leave. “Find happiness where you can,” she whispered. “Wherever you can.”

The Aurors had arrived on the scene within minutes, and two of them were sent out to make sure the police and other pedestrians believed it was a false alarm. They found three adults – two males and one female – on the ground, their faces frozen in permanent expressions of surprise. The second floor was much worse. At the top of the stairs was the half-naked corpse of a young pregnant woman, lying in a pool of blood. There was a gaping hole in her belly, presumably from a large dagger, dispelling any thoughts of saving the unborn child.

Several of the Aurors blanched, and one – Jason Greeley, his first on-scene case – stumbled blindly down the stairs, retching violently into the sink. They turned their heads away, giving him a sort of privacy while still watching out of the corners of their eyes for any nasty surprises left behind. The young man’s face was red with shame when he returned.

Another Auror, a veteran from the first war, conjured him a glass of water. “Happens to every one of us the first time,” he said, offering a rough sort of comfort. “Is it always like this?” Jason asked unsteadily. “Sometimes worse. You’ll find you become numb to it after a while. Dunno if it’s a good thing, though.”

Jason didn’t know whether to wish he were a veteran and used to such sights or to wish he’d never taken the job.

Artor, the leader of this particular group, called for their Sensitive, Mabon. The term ‘Sensitive’ was self-explanatory. Sensitives were born with the ability to sense magic: what type, how powerful, and even roughly how long ago it had been cast. They were invaluable to the Forensic and Crime Investigational Magics Departments.
Mabon’s skin crawled as she felt the lingering traces of Wild Magic. It was clear to her that it had emanated from the pregnant woman, perhaps released at her death, or near death. There was a certain sense of control, about as much as Wild Magic would allow. The death of the other woman among the Death Eaters was no accident.

She concentrated more on the pregnant victim.

“Extensive Cruciatus; lingering traces of Imperio, used once or twice; full Body-Bind.” She spoke monotonously, almost numb from horror. “Wild Magic was released near death under as much control as possible. The dead around her were killed by that release.”

“Then we can assume that this other woman was the traitor?” their captain asked.

Mabon paused and closed her eyes briefly and shifted closer to the body. “Yes,” she murmured. “I can feel a break – a sort of emptiness – around her in regards to the Secret-Keeper spell. She betrayed them.”

Artor sighed. “Right. Let’s not just sit around, we have work to do. Eirik.”

Another man stepped forward, glancing up from his file. “The three in the front were Marge Sammison, her husband Kevin, and Daniel Westerman. The traitor is Katie McCormick, and this woman is Sarah LeMarme. The two children of Marge and Kevin, five-year-old twins Carly and Kyle, another couple, Dianna and Adam Moon, and their child, eight-year-old Rhiannon, also occupy this house.”

Artor nodded. “Check the rest of this floor, and I don’t need to tell you to be careful.”

“Constant vigilance,” cracked a woman softly as they split up. There was soft, strained laughter. Twenty minutes later the group reported back. The twins had been murdered in their beds, and the Moon couple had managed to take out three other Death Eaters before being killed themselves.

“The girl,” Eirik said excitedly. “Rhiannon. She’s missing; maybe still alive.”

“Where?” demanded Artor wearily. “Do any of you know anything about this house?”

“A Locator spell,” suggested Jason timidly.

“Fine,” agreed their leader. “But hurry. We’re too exposed.”

Jason murmured the words of the spell, and waited for the tip of his wand to glow a soft golden yellow. It led him to an antique full-length mirror, and, scowling in frustration, began running over standard spell-detection charms.

Artor shifted uncomfortably. Something was different… Suddenly he realized that the air had been slowly but steadily growing warmer. Puzzled, he looked around, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable. He didn’t like to think it, but the girl was probably dead, and he couldn’t risk his group.

The scent of smoke reached his nose, and he nearly vaulted over the banister to check the downstairs floor. Something glowed in the far corner, and then suddenly a corner of the kitchen burst into flames. His mind connected the dots in an instant.

“Everyone out now! They planted an ashwinder!”

Jason, in a panic, used one of the more powerful spells he knew to wrench the mirror aside. Inside a young girl was curled up, trembling in the corner. “Come on, Rhiannon. We need to leave quickly.”

She shrank back into the corner. “Sarah…” She licked her lips. “Sarah said not to move. Not until she came for me.”

“She can’t come for you anymore. This is an emergency, Rhiannon. If you don’t come with me you could die.” He reached for her, but she suddenly jumped at him, clawing at him in a panic, and stumbled by.

“Catch her!” Jason exclaimed at the few Aurors who still remained to try to counteract the magical blaze caused by the ashwinder eggs as he ran after her.

One of the men pointed his wand and shouted “Stupefy!” but another knocked his arm away.

“Idiot! We don’t want to scare her any more than she already is.”

The fire suddenly caught on the stairs and leaped to the second floor.

“Everyone out NOW!” Artor exclaimed. “There’s nothing more that we can do! Disapparate immediately!” Rather than taking his own advice, he ran after the young idiot and the child.

“Mommy,” sobbed Rhiannon as she stumbled through the smoke. “Daddy.” By sheer accident,
she tripped and fell in time to miss being hit by a burning section of the ceiling. She got her feet under her, and then froze at the sight that met her eyes. Blood, so much blood, and her mommy and daddy. Dead.

She screamed, and then struggled as Jason caught up with her. “Tranquilium,” he incanted, and her eyes slowly closed.

Artor jerked the boy around. “Idiot!” he roared. “Get back to Headquarters!”

Jason obeyed, but he felt no regret about rescuing the girl. He would never have been able to live with himself if he hadn’t caught her, and resigned himself to the probability that he would be fired.

Across the street a teenage couple watched the house collapse in upon itself. The boy hugged his companion close and rested his chin on her head.

“You can’t save them all, Sakura.”

She swiped a hand over her eyes. “I didn’t do anything this time. I couldn’t even watch, since you blocked me.” Anger entered her voice, but died almost as quickly. She couldn’t fault him for wanting to protect her.

“I helped the only one left alive. Helped. That’s all my power amounted to,” Syaoran replied in disgust at his helplessness.

“It wasn’t your fault. You’re not omniscient.”

Syaoran had discovered the plot only by chance when the group who had left to destroy the safehouse returned triumphant. By the time he’d learned where and what had happened, it was too late to save anyone. He had been about to leave for the site when Sakura had contacted him and insisted on coming along. They had heard the shouting of the Aurors as the house burst into flame, and Sakura had watched out for Syaoran as he extended his awareness into the building. It was Syaoran’s power that had caused the girl to trip just in time to keep from being killed by the collapsing ceiling. It had also given Jason time to catch up and take Rhiannon to safety.

“I can’t do anything! Sometimes I’d just as soon we eradicated every last one of them from the Earth! I hope you never see what they do for entertainment. Sometimes…” His voice broke and Sakura twisted around to see the tears shimmering in his eyes. “Sometimes the only way to help their prisoners is to kill them. I can’t save them all, can’t save even half of them in case they become too suspicious.” His voice had become mocking and angry, and his grip on her had tightened unconsciously.

It was this that truly made Sakura realize what a toll their spying had taken on Syaoran. No matter how hurt he was, how much pain he was in, she had never seen him so close to breaking down.

“You can come help me at Hogwarts,” she told him softly. “We don’t need to watch this Dark Lord’s camp day and night, especially if you haven’t laid eyes on him yet. Ruby Moon can – ”

“Iie,” Syaoran said firmly. “We need someone among the enemy, and this camp is one of the most important ones. Ruby Moon is already busy ferreting out the other camps, and it’s slow work. Suppi is doing our research, and the stuffed animal is acting as messenger. Eriol and Tomoyo are at the Ministry searching for files and plans, and you are at Hogwarts, the center of the wizarding resistance. We can’t bring in any other sorcerers. I am the only one left. We’re too knowledgeable of our own spheres to switch everything now.”

Sakura sighed, but gave in. “Perhaps,” she mused, “it’s time to call out Yue. Another Moon Guardian would definitely help in finding more Death Eater camps.”

“Hai,” Syaoran acknowledged.

“Have you found Xiomara Hooch?” Sakura asked, finally breaking the silence.

Syaoran shook his head. “She’s not in the camp. Perhaps send Yue to watch for her as well.”

“Hai,” Sakura replied and used Fly to speed back to the castle. The house wasn’t all that far away, and she landed lightly on the grassy slope. She was about to head indoors when she felt the air thicken with magic. She cocked her head as she heard the burble of a creek and looked around cautiously.

Suddenly a crystal clear creek ran right in front of her shoes, over smooth rocks that hadn’t been there before.

“Well,” Sakura commented inanely. “That’s not something you see every day.”
The darkness lightened until it seemed as if it were noon, and Sakura noticed that she no longer shivered from the chill. Indeed, she had the feeling that if she were to take off the scarf and heavy cloak, she would still feel perfectly comfortable.

“Greetings, Card Mistress,” said the voice of a woman, and Sakura jumped before bowing low to the beautiful creature before her.

“Greetings,” she replied with a deep bow and said formally, “am I correct in thinking that you are the Queen of the Daoine Sidhe?”

“You are, sorcerer,” the Faerie said with a small smile. “Well met.”

“What brings you here?” Sakura frowned. “Or is it what brings me here?”

The queen laughed. “Whichever you prefer. It does not matter to us. As to why we are together, I have a message for you. Listen carefully. As I am sure you are aware, the fate of this battle has yet to be determined. You must protect the major players in this game, or all will be lost.”

Sakura frowned, and then her expression cleared, and she smiled. “In order that they be protected, isn’t it also necessary that those they care about are protected.?”

“You have a large heart, little one. If you feel that is what needs be done, then do it, but remember that you cannot save them all. Now you must do more than simply observe, you must protect at all costs. The history of these islands watches over the mortals, but it will require work and sacrifice to triumph.”

Sakura bowed again, her heart considerably lighter now that her first priority was protecting lives rather than secrecy. When she looked up, she was back on the path that led to the castle. As she made her way to the doors, she wished she had thought to ask why the Fae were taking such an active interest in who won the war.

It was lunchtime on the campus of Tomoeda University, and the cafeteria was filled with chatter as the students breezed through another day.

Touya glared darkly at his food and stabbed it viciously. He had been in a foul mood ever since Sakura had tied him up and dropped him in a random dorm room.

Well, fouler mood. Foul had been when he’d discovered that Sakura – his little sister – was traveling to England with that…that…that gaki. That evil Chinese gaki he was going to make wish had never been born.

Yukito coughed lightly and Touya realized that he’d completely mutilated his meal and bent his fork tines. His broken chopsticks had fallen to the side of his tray. The other students who regularly ate with Kinomoto-san and Tsukishiro-san had grown almost used to this disturbing scene, having sat through breakfast, lunch, and dinner like that for the past few days.

“What’s his problem?” Ichihara-san asked as Touya stood up to drop off his tray and attempt to explain the fork.

“His younger sister, her friends, and her boyfriend are in England. Touya wishes to tear him apart limb by limb,” Yukito explained wearily. “I really must talk to him. I think he’s getting worse.”

Sakura trudged wearily to her room, deciding to forgo the bath until after she slept. She wondered how long she had been talking to the Faerie Queen. Time moved differently between worlds, after all.

As she passed by the Hospital Wing, she thought to look in on the family Syaoran had teleported to the grounds earlier. She didn’t see them, and came to the conclusion that spare rooms had been provided for them. She supposed it was possible that they had been taken back to their house, but surely the family would not only be terrified that they would be killed, they would also demand explanations. Explanations about wizards, witches, magic, et cetera, would take time, and could wait until morning when everyone had recovered.

A small form among the empty beds caught her attention, and she stepped lightly over to the bed. A young girl, maybe seven or eight years old, lay there staring blankly at the ceiling. Pale blonde hair, nearly white, framed an ashen face, and her bright blue were glazed over in despair. Her eyes never flickered as Sakura approached her.
Sakura looked down at the clipboard at the foot of the bed, which began with the child’s name: Rhiannon Moon. She skimmed the sheet, and several words caught her eye. ‘…minor burns… bruises…severe shock…’

She turned to the next and last page, frowning to see nothing but blank parchment. Why would they stick a spare sheet of parchment on the back? she wondered. Surely not to make notes on. It seemed such a waste.

A glimmer of suspicion entered Sakura’s mind, and she viewed the clipboard with the Sight. It shone like a lantern, and it took only a moment to shield off the charm, making sure it stayed intact so that she could slip it back on when she was done.

Sakura read through the circumstances of Rhiannon’s condition and realized that she was the child Syaoran had helped to save. She hadn’t known that Rhiannon had witnessed her parents’ mangled bodies, and a friend’s ravaged corpse. Wizarding Child Services was searching for any living relatives, but that could take weeks, possibly even months. Her case was common of the violent times.

“Rhiannon?” Sakura asked softly, desperately wishing to comfort her and take away her pain. She received no acknowledgement, no hint of awareness.

‘Sometimes,’ Tomoyo had once told her, ‘holding someone heals them the most. Sometimes silence and the simple fact that the one hurting knows you’re there is all that is needed.’ And so Sakura crawled into bed next to the little witch and held her close, as a mother would her child. “Don’t worry Rhiannon. You’re safe here.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Rhiannon’s eyes closed and tears flooded down her cheeks, and she cried silently into Sakura’s shirt. It may have been a few minutes or a few hours, but eventually Rhiannon’s breathing steadied and she slept almost peacefully. Sakura stayed for a few more minutes, and closed her eyes briefly, planning to leave as soon as she was sure she wouldn’t disturb the child. But she was tired and accidentally dropped off as well.

When Poppy Pomfrey returned to the Hospital Wing early in the morning to quickly check on her patient before grabbing her breakfast she was shocked to see a Seventh year girl asleep and curled around her. Madame Pomfrey immediately crossed over to the bed to yank the Seventh year away, but stopped short at what she saw. The Rhiannon who had been brought in acknowledged no one, seemed to see nothing, and constantly trembled with fear. This Rhiannon clung to the older girl as if she were a lifeline, and she slept calmly with no sign of the dark night.

Almost against her better judgment, she left the two alone.

When she returned from breakfast with a tray of food for two, and went to the storage cupboard for a healing potion, little had changed. Poppy called Rhiannon’s name and the little witch blinked sleepily, brow furrowed in confusion at where she was. The other girl didn’t stir.

Slowly Rhiannon’s memory returned and her eyes began tearing up. “I’m – I’m gonna…” Poppy immediately recognized the signs and Summoned a bowl, quickly but gently forcing her to sit up and lean away from her companion. The nurse held her short hair back and made soothing sounds, rubbing circles on the child’s back as she retched into the bowl.

“Mommy,” she moaned as she finished heaving, and wiped her face dry of tears with her sleeve. “Come, dear, rinse with water.” She helped her to drink from the goblet. “Then take this potion, it’ll get rid of the queasy feeling.”

Rhiannon made a face, but obeyed.

“Do you think you can hand some toast and water?” Poppy asked when she was done. Rhiannon nodded sleepily, and nibbled on a piece of toast.

Throughout all the action, the other girl remained asleep. The medi-witch checked to make sure she was breathing. Poor thing looked exhausted, and there were dark circles under her eyes. It was a wonder the Seventh Years got any sleep between studying for NEWTs and the war. She decided to write a note to excuse her from class when she woke up. She wasn’t a familiar face, but Poppy rarely saw students outside of the Infirmary.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked Rhiannon.

The witch shrugged. “She came in last night and told me I was safe and held me like Mommy used to.” Her voice cracked and a new wave of tears threatened, but she took a deep breath and
got control of herself.
“Drink this. It’ll help you sleep.” Madame Pomfrey handed her a small vial of potion, and
Rhiannon drank it without question. Almost immediately she flopped back, sound asleep.

“Nnng,” Sakura groaned. “Five more minutes.”
She heard someone giggle, and immediately sat up. Her eyes were gritty and it took a moment for
her to focus on her surroundings. She was surprised to see a little girl watching her.
“You’re funny,” Rhiannon told her contentedly. “I’ve been shaking you forever.”
“That’s nice,” she murmured, about to go back to sleep when she thought to ask, “What time is
it?”
“After lunch.”
“Wha-” She cut herself off before someone else heard her. “Did anyone come in here?” she asked
uneasily.
“Uh huh. The nurse came by to bring breakfast, and then she came by with lunch a little while
ago. She left a tray for you. My favorite: fish and chips. Are you a student here? What’s your
name?”
Sakura laughed, and stood up to stretch. She noticed a flicker of fear and sorrow flash in the little
girl’s eyes.
“Are you going to leave me too?” she asked in a small voice, suddenly losing her buoyant
cheerfulness.
“I’ll be back tonight,” Sakura promised. “Pinky promise. My name is Sakura.”
“I’m Rhiannon, but everyone calls me Rhia.”
Sakura grabbed the plate of food to bring with her, suddenly realizing how ravenous she was. “I’ll
see you tonight Rhia.”
“Don’t forget,” the witch whispered as she left.
She gasped when she stepped into the main part of the Infirmary as she came face to face with
Poppy Pomfrey and Minerva McGonagall. Madame Pomfrey was putting Minerva’s arm in a
sling.
“Someone bumped into him, and the spell ricocheted off of the walls…” Minerva trailed off when
she saw Sakura, and the Card Mistress froze. This was it. She was going to be recognized and the
game would be up. She’d ruined it for Eriol and Syaoran and Tomoyo…
Wait. Something wasn’t right. Her aura was completely different, as if she’d changed personalities
over night, the tie that connected her to the real Minerva McGonagall led outside the castle, and
there was no hint of recognition in her eyes. Not another one, she thought. But now that she
looked, there was no taint, no sense of evil in her aura. She withdrew the name from the look-
alike’s mind. Nymphadora Tonks.
“Do you need a note for class?” asked the nurse.
“N-no. I’m fine.” Sakura sighed in relief as she made it into the hall without further mishap.
“It’s about time,” said a familiar voice and she jumped, almost dropping her lunch.
“Suppi-san,” she breathed, wishing her heart would slow down. “When did you get here?”
“I do not know this ‘Suppi’ of whom you speak,” the small creature replied placidly.
“I’ll show you to the library, then,” Sakura said, and started off. “What’s in the furushiki?”
“They are the supplies you asked Eriol-sama to get. Master asked me to bring it to you.”
“Arigato gozaimasu,” she said. He sat on her shoulder in silence, which made her almost edgy.
She was used to Kero’s constant chatter.
“This is it,” she murmured, and headed to an empty corner under the watchful eye of the
Librarian. “I’m not sure how they organize the books, but I guess I could…”
“Do not concern yourself. I am certain I will be able to figure out the system. Thank you.” Spinel
immediately began to skim the shelves, and Sakura backed out quietly, carrying her supplies.
Sakura wondered whether she should do the ritual that day since she had everything. She paused
and pondered it. Not yet, some sixth sense told her. It was too soon. What she could do was call
upon Yue, and so she began the climb to the deserted North Tower with a sigh. So many stairs.
Syaoran strained for a glimpse of the infamous Dark Lord. Apparently he appeared at different camps randomly, and they were going to be graced with his presence for the next few days. Joy. He sucked in his breath when he caught sight of the man. If it could still be called a man. His eyes were blood red, his nostrils almost slits, his lips almost lipless. He appeared to be little more than skin and bones, and his skin was sickly pale. He had no hair anywhere, and his limbs seemed almost disproportionately long. Voldemort resembled nothing more than the large snake he strode beside, and his aura exuded darkness, and the pleasure of fear and pain.

From a distance he hardly looks threatening. But looks can be deceiving, said a voice in Syaoran’s head, and he jumped.

Hiiragizawa, he growled mentally. Where are you?

You’ll see.

Don’t do anything stupid, he ordered, and almost immediately he heard a commotion somewhere to his left, and two burly wizards appeared, dragging Eriol out from behind the bushes. You baka. Voldemort stopped mid-sentence and looked over at them in irritation. “What issss going on?”

“We found him spying, my Lord,” began the one on Eriol’s left.

“Yessss, I can ssssee that, Avery,” he said impatiently. “How did a Muggle get passsst the wardssss?”

“The ‘Muggle’ is not mute,” Eriol said calmly, with his customary smile. “Although I would prefer not to answer, of course.”

“Sssilence. Sssuch impudence will not go unpunished. Ssssearch for his wand, and then make an example of him, but do not kill him. He hasss peaked my curiosssity,” Voldemort ordered carelessly.

“Does this mean I won’t be taken to the prisoners’ tent?” he asked, as if he did not notice the two guards who were able to break his arms as if they were twigs.

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you that you sssspeak sssso calmly when faced with your death? Are you mad or sssimply foolish?”

Syaoran was mentally cursing up a storm, and unable to figure out Eriol’s game. Was he trying to intimidate the Dark Lord?

Be ready, came Eriol’s voice, and Syaoran sighed as he slowly made his way closer, careful not to draw attention to himself.

“Mad, definitely. Living with two sets of memories does that to you.” He stood as if he didn’t know that the guards were patting him down, searching for a wand, or as if they were beneath his notice.

“You are asss good asss dead, fool. Do not think to resisst. I command hundreds, and every one of them would gladly torture and dispose of you and your Muggle-loving kind.”

Eriol’s eyes hardened, and he made as if to step forward, but the two wizards brought him up short. “You have much to learn, I see. I’m rather disappointed. I expected better from the infamous Dark Lord. I’d wager that I could free myself using those Muggle methods you so despise.”

“You think I will play gamesss with a mere boy?”

Nagini hissed and drew herself up, but Eriol paid no attention to her. “First lesson: When one is certain of death, you should be most wary, for he has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Duck, warned Syaoran, almost before he had finished talking, and Eriol dropped, landing heavily on his shoulder as the Li clan leader leaped into the air and aimed a kick at the wizard on his right.

Eriol rolled onto his back and slammed his foot up into the other one’s groin, taking him down.

No magic, he warned, getting to his knees. His hands were behind his back in manacles; they’d clapped them onto his wrists while he was being searched for a wand.

But he didn’t take your wager, Syaoran protested, kicking one person’s feet out from under her. Doesn’t matter. Eriol awkwardly dug into his pocket for a bobby pin. This will scare him more. Lean over. Eriol obeyed in time for someone to trip over him and go flying backwards.

“Ow,” he muttered, working the bobby pin into the keyhole in the manacles. The clearing had become a scene of mass chaos, and Voldemort was trying in vain to restore order. Eriol was somewhat out of sight on the ground, so he only had to endure people kicking him as he picked
the lock. Finally they dropped off, and he swept several people’s feet out from under them before standing. Let’s go.
The two disappeared, but it was a long time before order was once again established.

Harry sighed and stared out the window. It was sunny if chilly and much more appealing than the theory behind the Wumblebumbus Charm, or whatever it was.
A silhouette at the window of the North Tower caught his eye, and he stared more closely. The figure of a man with wings…an angel?
He blinked, and the image disappeared. There was someone at the window yes, but it looked to be about the size of a student, and there were definitely no wings. Harry shook his head, and focused his attention on Professor Flitwick. He was imagining things.
Eriol and Syaoran landed in the living room of Eriol’s mansion. The Chinese boy immediately rounded on his partner and proceeded to explode.

“Are you insane!” he demanded. “On a whim you decided to take on the whole damned camp?! Are you high?! You could have been killed! I could have been discovered!” He switched from Japanese to Chinese and began muttering to himself, gesticulating wildly.

“Crazy. Absolutely insane…only explanation,” Eriol heard. He beamed and said, “Why Syaoran-chan. I didn’t know you cared.”

“Herk.” Syaoran froze, a strange sound emerging from his throat. “You…you…you bastard,” he said through gritted teeth.
“Come now,” said Eriol disapprovingly. “One shouldn’t speak so disrespectfully of one’s own ancestors. Besides, such a belief bodes ill for you. Oh, hello Kaho.”

Syaoran’s legs muscles tensed as if he were ready to dive at Eriol. Only the presence of Mizuki Kaho kept him from committing murder. “Good evening, Xiao Lang,” she greeted.

“Good evening, Mizuki-sensei,” he replied with a jerky bow.

She turned to Eriol. “What have you been up to now?”

“My cute descendant is overreacting. I simply wished to meet his host.”

Kaho raised an eyebrow. “I trust it was a pleasant meeting?”

“As much as could be expected,” he answered delicately.

“Now that you are here, I do not have to find Cerberus, at least.”

Eriol brightened. “You have the results?”

Syaoran had watched this exchange with a frown. Now he jumped in. “What’s this about, Hiiragizawa?”

“Yes,” Kaho agreed unexpectedly. “I, too, must know what all of this is about, because the results mean little to me. I’m afraid I will not be able to tell you unless I know what exactly is going on.”

“Blackmail, Kaho?” Rather than look put-out, the blue-haired boy looked rather pleased. Indeed, Syaoran half expected him to add, “You have learned well, my dear.”

So he set himself down and after giving Syaoran a brief overview of what he had had Kaho experiment with, he launched into the report of their investigation of wizards. Syaoran noticed that he did not tell everything, and this Kaho guessed, for that was simply Eriol’s way. This she accepted about him, for one must take the good with the bad in any relationship.

“They are not so secretive and isolated as they believe themselves to be,” Kaho commented contemplatively.

“No,” Eriol agreed. “The people on the streets know of them, and it appears that most have come to dislike, or even hate, witches and wizards indiscriminately.”

“They can’t stay hidden for much longer,” said Syaoran. “Not if knowledge of them has become common on the streets. Months, years, decades, their isolation is limited. Already, we have discovered them, and I don’t doubt that there have been other sorcerers before us to meet them, though whether they were recognized as wizards, I don’t know. Which reminds me. What on EARTH were you THINKING?!”

Eriol looked at him reproachfully. “I certainly didn’t do that for fun.”

Syaoran raised an eyebrow and snorted.

“Well,” he amended, pouting, “it wasn’t my main reason. I wanted to see for myself what this Voldemort was like. I thought to give him a warning and shake him up.”

“Well now he’ll certainly take your ‘lesson,’ into consideration, and be sure that the prisoners will always have a sort of baseless hope to keep them weak before killing them.”

“But he won’t,” Eriol replied, eyes glittering dangerously. “He’s too full of himself, overconfident
in his superiority. He believes nothing can hurt him. We’ve shaken him up, but I’ve no doubt he will simply order his men to look out for us and then forget about the threat. He’s become careless, attacking strategic points in open daylight as well as undercover in darkness. In his mind, he is immortal, invincible. But he is distracted by his rage against Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter, both of whom have stood up to him, thwarted him. This you would see if you took the time to look.”

“And I suppose,” Syaoran sighed, “that your show was for the benefit of the Light as well.”

Eriol beamed. “I wouldn’t put it past that old wizard to have someone watching every camp, especially such a large one.” He turned to Kaho. “So. Inform us.”

“It’s actually fairly simple,” Kaho said. “There’s a self-enforced, magical mutation in the DNA, dulling any foreign offensive magic, promoting their isolationism, and sealing off certain, powerful, extended, and detailed spells. Mainly rituals.”

Syaoran and Eriol blinked.

“That’s it?” asked Syaoran after a moment.

“Hai. More or less,” she replied cheerfully.

“That’s too simple,” Syaoran muttered. “All this gathering of information has been complicated, strenuous, and/or difficult. This is handed to us on a silver platter. There must be a catch.”

Eriol frowned in thought, tapping a finger against his chin absently. Then he summoned paper and a pen, and began composing a letter to Sakura. “She ought to know, and it’ll help me think if I write it down,” he explained.

“I’ll go make us some tea,” Kaho murmured, standing and heading to the kitchen.

Syaoran leaned against the wall, arms crossed, glaring absently at the blue-haired youth. After several moments of silence as Eriol composed the letter in his head, Syaoran said, “I’m worried about Sakura. It’s not healthy for her to be constantly drained and working on little sleep.”

Eriol frowned in concern. “She’s been working too hard. But soon,” he added reassuringly, “this will be done with. One way or another.” Then he returned to his letter writing.

My dear Sakura-chan, he began.

I have discovered how the wizards resist our magical attacks, though the why of it eludes me. Perhaps you should set Suppi-chan on the mystery. It seems that a mutation has occurred in the wizards’ DNA, most likely the result of a long-ago advanced and extremely powerful spell. The purpose seems to have been to protect them from sorcerous attacks, although it seems that it merely blunts its power rather than blocking it altogether, and there are so many loopholes as to render it rather useless.

A side-effect of this protection somehow promotes their isolation. Perhaps knowledge of them resists the mind, or some such. It is something that needs looking into.

Eriol paused, wondering whether he should clarify that he was not implying that she should be the one to look into it. He decided against it. Knowing Sakura, she wouldn’t notice any implications anyway. Appearing not to notice that Syaoran was, once again, attempting to bore a hole through his head with his eyes alone, Eriol continued writing.

As I’m sure Cerberus and Yue have drummed into your head, every spell has its price. This one
appears to have erased most or all knowledge of any other magic-users, be them sorcerers or witch doctors. The main price, however, is their inability to cast what we would consider powerful spells. Rituals are forbidden to them, and would most likely result in the death of the witch or wizard.

I did not forget what you wrote to me of Albus Dumbledore’s ritual, but I believe that the Faerie blood in him managed to protect him from death. And, too, you wrote that it was a basic ritual, one of the first young sorcerers are taught. Anything much more powerful would have killed him, regardless of whatever slight Otherworldly blood that circulates his body.

My kawaii little descendant is impatient to be off, and –

Eriol grinned evilly.

-- he says he loooooooovvvvvveeeessssssssssssssssssssss you and wishes –

Eriol never got a chance to tell Sakura what Syaoran ‘wishes,’ as the paper was yanked from under his pen, leaving a crooked line down the rest of the page and on his coffee table. Syaoran, paranoid to begin with, could not fail to see Eriol’s “devil incarnate” smirk. He skimmed the letter, eyes narrowing further as he reached the last incomplete sentence.

He yanked the pen away from Eriol, who was sitting on the couch pouting, and scribbled out the offending line, added a few ‘Must kill Eriol’ s and a “DIEEEE, DEMON SPAWN!!!” before briefly writing a greeting to his beloved and signing his name. The letter went back and forth between the two boys, as Kaho wisely took refuge in the kitchen and out of sight, before Syaoran left, taking the letter with him at Eriol’s behest.

“Kero should be reaching you soon. I sent him off not that long ago with a note for you.”

“Why did we even make that nuigurumi out message bearer?” the Li muttered. “Oh,” he said, and looked over his shoulder as he stood in the open window, gripping the frame. “Sakura said that she would release Yue to help Ruby Moon with your mapping.”

“Good,” Eriol smiled as Syaoran disappeared, returning to the Death Eater camp.

Kaho joined Eriol. “He forgot his tea,” she commented.

“Touya, I’m worried about you,” Yukito said, snacking lightly on a grocery bag full of dumplings. His metabolism hadn’t slowed in the years since Sakura had separated him and his other half. This was Touya’s third job for the day, this one in a pet store. He’d been working like one possessed, the “Chinese gaki” not far from his mind. Already he had half of a plane fare to London.

Touya was dusting the shelves, with Yukito next to him.

“You’ve been working yourself to the bone, and I’m afraid that you’ll make yourself sick.”

“Daijoubu,” the elder Kinomoto sibling replied gruffly.

Yukito frowned cutely. This was not how he wanted this to go at all. His boyfriend was exhausting himself, and refused to listen to reason.

“Sooner or later you’re going to have to accept that Sakura-chan and Li-kun are together,” he said sternly. He bit his lip. Right away he knew that was the wrong thing to say. A vein pulsed in Touya’s forehead, and the feather duster appeared rather flimsy in Touya’s clenched fist.
“How dare that gaki delude my sister into thinking she loves him,” he growled.

Yukito sighed, giving it up as a lost cost, and placed a comforting hand on the other boy’s fist.

Suddenly, several aisles down, a man yelled, “Bad dog!”

Several seconds later a voice over the intercom announced, “Clean up on aisle 3.”

“That’s me,” Touya said apologetically, and went to get the mop.

Yukito sighed and said good bye, resolving to drug Touya’s food at the first opportunity.

Fujitaka, home from work, was halfway to the kitchen when he noticed the light on the phone was flashing, indicating that there was a message waiting. He hit play and set his briefcase on the table as Sakura’s familiar voice spoke.

“Moshi moshi, Otousan. Heh heh. I always forget about the time difference. You must be at work. Anyway, I just called to let you know I was still alive…”

Her father chuckled, having no idea that his daughter might easily have been injured several times.

“…and to ask a favor. Could you send me one of my stuffed animals? I’ll leave it for you to decide which one. You see, there’s this little girl I met whose parents recently died, and is having trouble dealing with it. I thought maybe a stuffed animal would be nice and keep her company. If sending it around the world is too much for you, call Eriol’s house, and one of us will summon it.” Here Sakura’s concern was evident. The little things were easy for her father, but Eriol retained most of Clow Reed’s power.

“Scotland and England are so interesting! I haven’t gotten the chance to ride on one of those two storey buses yet, but I hope we get the chance before we leave. We haven’t done much sightseeing, except in the country. Kirei desu ne. I love you, and say hi to Yukito-san and ‘Niichan for me. Sayonara.”

Sakura had, of course, carefully worded her message to keep it as true as possible without giving too many details. No matter how liberal and easy-going Kinomoto Fujitaka was, if he had even the slightest inkling of what his daughter was doing, she’d be whisked home immediately, and quite possibly grounded for life.

Minerva had been keeping an eye on the Death Eaters camped somewhere along the coast of Cornwall for nearly 24 hours. It wasn’t long as most missions went, but it had become rather boring. Every once in a while she’d patrol around the edge of the camp, curling up as a cat under bushes or up in trees. The camp was much smaller than had been reported, though where those Death Eaters had gone, she didn’t know. Unless something happened that she needed to return to Dumbledore, she’d have to stay at least another two days, maybe more. Food was not much of a problem, as she allowed her cat instincts to surface when hunting.

She was just drifting off to sleep when she became aware of a soft, strange sound. Her ears perked up and swiveled this way and that. Her nose twitched, and she widened her eyes to take advantage of the light of the waxing moon. There seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary, but
the soft whishing sound was getting louder, though not loud enough for these humans to notice. Instinctively she looked up, and her tail twitched in surprise. A woman dressed in dark robes flew through the night on butterfly wings and appeared to be heading for the camp.

Ruby Moon landed, cloaked in moonlight and shadow, and so hidden from normal sight. But a cat can see what few others can, though they are solitary creatures and rarely choose to make such facts common knowledge. But it mattered not to Ruby Moon’s mission.

The Moon Guardian passed unseen through the camp, muttering to herself. If she could scare the superstitious ones, so much the better.

Minerva waited frozen as Ruby Moon, after several minutes, walked away into the woods. She had to force her tail to be still when the moonlight coalesced into a crystal bird. Her striped tail wanted to twitch repeatedly in agitation. Minerva’s ears pricked up when the woman started speaking.

“Master Eriol,” she said in a singsong voice.

There was a pause, and then she replied to someone only she could hear.

“Along the coast of Cornwall. About 400 men and creatures, give or take…You know I mean sentient magical creatures. It’s what you specified after all…Prisoners? Mou, you ask so much of your favorite creation…” She pouted, an expression oddly fitting on the grown woman’s face. “It’s so tedious, and nothing interesting ever happens, hardly,” she whined. “Wha-? Yue-san?!! Oooo, I’m gonna - … No fair!…But it’s fun to tease him…Yes, yes, more expedient.”

Ruby Moon sighed a long suffering sigh. “Fine, I’ll call back when I find how many are locked up…Creatures?…Werewolves, vampires, lamia, and bird-women…Hai, harpies.” She scowled, obviously disliking the creatures of air, and not wishing to even use their proper name. “You know, we really should think about importing pocky…Fine, I’m going. Hunt’s luck to you, Master…Heard one of the feline bards use the term…Ja matta.”

Minerva waited a while to be sure the woman – if woman she was – was gone before loping away from the camp. Dumbledore needed to hear this in person.

And why had Japanese suddenly become so popular?

“Harry, if you’re going to drag me around the school early in the morning without even letting me eat breakfast, at least tell me why,” said Hermione with a scowl. “I leave in less than an hour.”

Then she took a good look around the Room of Requirement, and raised an eyebrow at him, looking strangely like Professor McGonagall. “While you’re at it, why is the room so obviously sound-proof, the walls padded, the furniture nailed to the floor, and nothing potentially dangerous around to throw?”

“You’ll understand later,” Harry said nervously. He was looking anywhere but at her, and his hand rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to figure out how to say what he wanted to say.

“I’m waiting,” Hermione said pitilessly. “You’ve got five minutes, and then I’m going to eat.”

“I can’t think of a better way to ask…” Harry muttered, and then blurted out, “Do you have crush on Moony?”

Hermione stared at him blankly. “No,” she replied immediately.
Harry focused his gaze on her and said seriously, “Are you sure?”

The ‘of course,’ died on Hermione’s lips as she considered the possibility for the first time. And she didn’t have to think long.

“I do,” she said in surprise. Then bit her lip and looked at Harry out of the corner of her eye. “You don’t hate me, do you?”

“Of course not,” Harry exclaimed. Then he paused, eyes glittering in barely suppressed mirth. “Well, actually…”

Hermione laughed as she searched for something to throw. Remembering that there was nothing, she settled for smacking him.

Her laughter died as the implications of her crush caught up with her. “No one can know,” she said to Harry in a deadly serious tone. “Not anyone.”

“But you shouldn’t waste what time you have-” Harry began.

Hermione shook her head violently. “It’s not about embarrassment or fear of rejection,” she interrupted. “Think Harry. Aside from you and Dumbledore, Ron, Professor McGonagall, and myself are at the top of Voldemort’s list.”

“Professor McGonagall?”

Just listen!” Hermione insisted. “And stop looking so guilty; Ron and I wouldn’t have it any other way. You should know that whoever we care for, as soon as Voldemort knows, that person will become even more endangered. So we can’t even hint that we might care more for one person than another. Promise me you won’t tell.”

Harry smiled sadly. “You’ve grown so fast, ‘Mione.”

“We all have,” she replied soberly “Promise.”

“I promise,” Harry sighed.

A look of horror crossed Hermione’s face. “Ron doesn’t know, does he?” she asked. The tall red-head had gotten very overprotective where his friends were concerned. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him, but he would be unable to go around as if nothing had changed.

Harry laughed. “Ron doesn’t do subtle.”

Hermione chuckled. “He doesn’t do blatantly obvious.”

She headed for the door. “Let’s go eat,” she said, looking back at him over her shoulder. “You have class.”

Harry groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

The two of them trooped down to the Great Hall where Ron and Ginny were waiting, in a manner of speaking. Ron was shoveling food into his mouth, and it was just as likely to be coincidence that he was still there when Harry and Hermione arrived.

“What were you two?” Ginny asked as they began spooning food onto their plates. With a wicked grin and a glance in Ron’s direction, she asked, “Were you snogging in the closet again?”
Ron choked, and began coughing violently. Harry pounded his back and struggled to keep from laughing.

“Wh-what?” the youngest Weasley son asked. “You mean…you two…and…Dear Merlin.” His eyes were wide as saucers as he looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione.

Hermione scowled. “We are not, Ron, so just relax.”

He looked at them suspiciously. “Are you sure?”

“Well, I’d think we’d be the ones to know whether we were a couple or not,” Hermione snapped, and walked down to the Entrance Hall in a huff.

Ron watched her go blankly. “Was it something I said?”

Harry simply shook his head, and began to eat.

Ron frowned, pausing with his fork halfway to his mouth, looking across the partially full room. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Harry looked up in surprise. Perhaps Ron did do subtle sometimes.

“I do too,” he replied quietly, and continued to eat.

“Stop it, both of you,” Ginny said worriedly, and then left them, swinging her book bag absently as she headed to Herbology.

“You’re late,” Draco greeted Hermione, chucking a roll at her head, as she joined the milling crowd of student volunteers who waited were waiting to make the trip to clean up Hogsmeade. Madame Hooch was still ill – none of the students had seen her for several days – so Hagrid was leading them.

Her training kicked in, and she snatched the roll in midair, looking at the Slytherin questioningly.

“You don’t eat enough,” he scowled.

“I’m not late,” Hermione informed him with a frown as she bit into her breakfast.

“You’re usually at least half an hour early.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

The two bickered almost amiably until Hagrid finally showed up and led the group of twelve down the dirt road.

And the Wheel of Destiny turned.

Yue flew east, in the direction of beginnings. Ruby Moon had already covered much of the western side of the island. Two minor camps of – what did they call themselves? Eaters of Death?
– had already been communicated to Hiiragizawa-san. So many creatures had decided to ally
themselves with Darkness, and not strictly the Unseelie court. Among the hobgoblins, trolls, and
kappa, he’d noted brownies and selkie among others. There were black sheep in every race.

Yue slipped by the Minotaur who stood guard, and passed a sleeping, smoking dragon as he made
his way to the prisoners’ quarters. He counted silently, examining each prisoner as he passed,
some in better condition, others worse, all of them gaunt and tortured, some insane. Once he’d
tallied up the number of prisoners he returned to the third to last cell and examined the witch
contained within.

The guardian glanced to the northwest, calculating the distance in his head, and then took off back
to the castle. The sun was only just rising, and it was not yet so far away that he could not return
by noon. His mistress would want to know that he had found the one she sought.

It took Yue less time than he had thought to reach Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,
though he was beginning to tire. He returned to the tower he had taken his leave from, and then let
his wings disappear. He allowed his creatures, the owls, to greet him for a moment, and then
silently exited.

Each step was soft and deliberate as Yue honed in on his mistress. The students must have been in
class, for he only occasionally distinguished the echo of footsteps in the halls, and easily hid
himself in the many nooks and crannies. Closer he drew to Sakura-sama, but when he reached the
stairs, they all led in the wrong directions.

Yue’s wings materialized, and he launched himself up…

…One storey, two, and only the portraits saw. They gasped, and one man ran, appearing in and
out of several frames, as he went to fetch the Headmaster. Yue alighted gently, and continued on
his way. He had noticed portraits moving along the way, but he had not known, nor been warned,
that they were sentient.

Several moments later, Yue found his mistress completely and utterly lost.

“Yue!” she exclaimed happily, and launched herself at him.

He suffered her affections with his characteristic stoic expression, although deep down, where he
refused to acknowledge, he almost came to…like…these displays.

Suddenly she looked around furtively, and her eyes widened as they alighted on a portrait, but
sighed in relief when the ancient man continued to snore with his back to them.

“What are you doing back so soon?” she asked quietly. “Nothing’s wrong, is there?”

“Iie, Sakura-sama,” Yue replied.

“Iie, Sakura-sama,” she told him in a no-nonsense tone. “Or ‘Sakura-chan,’ or even ‘Sakura-san,’ if
you must. You’re getting into bad habits again.”

He sighed almost imperceptibly and said, “I have found the witch you were looking for, Sakur-
asan."

She grinned, and then asked seriously, “Is she all right?”

“It was difficult to determine the full extent of her injuries, but I know for certain that there were
several broken bones and lacerations. Also, malnutrition and most likely sickness.”
Sakura’s emerald eyes hardened, and an unfamiliar emotion settled in her face: anger.

“Would you –”

Sakura cut herself off as Yue straightened suddenly and half turned toward the door.

“Someone’s coming.”

Sakura looked around in a panic as Yue shifted position so as not to be immediately noticeable.

“There,” she hissed, pointing toward a large window set high in the wall. “Find Syaoran. He’s in charge of the Death Eater aspect. Tell him to help her.”

“But Mistress,” Yue protested.

“Go,” she ordered as she heard muffled voices outside the door.

He obeyed, and flew upward, stepping through the glass and into the open air, but then turned and prepared to help Sakura if she needed it.

The young girl caught a flicker out of the corner of her eye, and whirled around. A young man stood in the middle of the painting, partially blocking the still sleeping old man. It was difficult to tell who was more startled, but soon the man vanished. There must have been a portrait outside the door, for she heard a voice outside the door say, “Someone else. In there.”

Sakura panicked and dove for the full-length mirror attached to the wall, whispering, “Mirror” as she did so.

The glass rippled as the Card Mistress passed through.

Yue turned and flew for Syaoran’s camp.

The door flew open and framed the Headmaster, wand at ready.

But there was no one there.

“B-but a girl was here just a moment ago,” spluttered the painting.

“Don’t worry Jacques, I believe you, and I thank you for coming for me,” said Dumbledore soothingly. “I’m sure, however, that whatever you saw is long gone.”

To be safe, he examined the room carefully, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Strange things have been happening in Hogwarts lately,” he murmured to himself as he left, shutting the door behind him. He was used to knowing what went on in his demesne and his lack of knowledge almost…unnerved him.

It was dark where Sakura was, pitch black. She battled the irrational fear that she’d gone blind, and closed her eyes. It was easier to deal with the blackness that way, so she could pretend to herself that she would be able to see when she opened her eyes.

Where was she? This wasn’t what had happened those few other times she’d traveled by mirror. Stranger.
The voice echoed in her head, not quite thought, not quite voice. She jumped and opened her eyes, but there was not change in the blackness. Sakura shut her eyes again and forced herself to relax.

“Wh-who’s there?” she asked in a quavering voice.

I warn you one last time. Do not harm those I protect or you will pay the price.

She tentatively stretched out her senses and felt a presence that had become very familiar to her indeed: the castle.

Before answering, she made sure to gather all of herself together, not even daring to leave behind a resonance for fear that she would become entangled in the great work that was Hogwarts.

“I understand.”

Sakura immediately felt herself falling, and opened her eyes as she landed on her backside in an unfamiliar room. She winced and stood, brushing off dirt and muttering under her breath. “You could have been gentler.”

She looked around and decided that she was in one of the dorm rooms. The beds were in shades of red and gold, and there was a tapestry of a lion on the wall. Now if only she knew where she was.

Picking a door that didn’t look like a closet, she slowly edged it open and looked out. Steps led downward, and from her angle, she could barely make out a fireplace and scattered chairs. Hearing the faint murmur of voices, she quietly eased the door shut again, and frowned, trying to think.

She noticed writing on the trunk closest to her, and read it, hoping to gain a clue.

“Ne-ville Long-bot-tom,” she murmured to herself, almost silently.

Three quarters of the way around the room she stumbled over Harry Potter.

“One of the ones I’m looking after,” she whispered.

Completing the circuit, she sighed in frustration, and wondered yet again where she was and how she was going to find any familiar landmarks. Not for the first time she wished her Rithlan were with her. What she needed was a map…

A map! Hadn’t she been thinking, less than an hour ago, that Harry Potter had just that thing? The way he was studying that piece of paper, or parchment, or whatever it was, and hid it before the professor turned the corner, as if he’d known someone was coming? This one was Harry's bed. Sakura had figured that much out. The parchment wasn't anywhere around it, and she was sure he didn't have it with him. Perhaps in his trunk? She knelt down in front of it and studied the keyhole. A fairly easy lock to pick, she decided, bringing out a skinny stick of metal and a hairpin, and inserted them in the keyhole. Immediately she jerked them out. The ends were smoking.

Cursing under her breath, Sakura studied the trunk more closely. She hadn't expected a student to spell his or her lock, but it made sense if they had a war going on. No telling who might get in the school and for what purpose.

Sakura placed several layers of protection over the hairpin and metal. It wouldn't disturb the spell and her lock picking tools wouldn't melt. After a moment's work she felt the lock pop open and lifted the trunk. Her search should be fairly easy since there were few things tucked inside.
She felt around, careful to leave everything exactly as she found it, and grinned. There, in the pocket of his green robe, she felt parchment crackle and pulled it out. Sakura closed the lid part way and sat down on the side opposite of the door to the dormitory. If she was caught unawares she would have enough time to become invisible and nothing would look disturbed. She got out her wand and tapped it against her hand, thinking. Perhaps an incantation, like with her staff and Cards?

"I, Sakura Kinomoto, would like to know the secret of this parchment," she chanted, and then as an added measure, tapped it with her wand. Almost immediately writing appeared and Sakura cocked her head to the side. This can't be it, she thought. Harry seemed to have known that a professor would be coming around the corner, and wizards are hopeless at sensing auras. He had said..."Mischief managed," tapped it with his wand, and stuffed it in his pocket. It was only then she actually read what was written on the page, and grinned.

"Mr. Prongs would like to know what a pretty girl like you is doing in a place like this?"

Mr. Moony would like to remind Mr. Prongs that he already has a girlfriend, the lucky dog.

And so on.

Mr. Padfoot is astonished that Mr. Moony is so forgetful as to who the dog actually is, and asks whether Miss Kinomoto would like to go out with him.

Mr. Wormtail apologizes, but cannot tell Miss Kinomoto the password. It’s a secret, you see. "Please?" said Sakura desperately. The pattern of magic on this parchment was so thick and confusing it would take weeks to sort it out, even if she had Eriol-san and Syaoran-kun's help. Mr. Padfoot would like to inform Miss Kinomoto that all she needs to do is tap the map with her wand and say, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," my beautiful lady.

Sakura suppressed her giggles as one last message appeared.

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, and Prongs would like to express their extreme disgust with Mr. Padfoot, the hormonal traitor, and bid Miss Kinomoto good-bye.

Sakura giggled, and then wondered what she should do now. She knew how to work the map, but she couldn’t take it with her. It would most definitely be missed.

Perhaps a link? Yes, that would be best.

Footsteps thumped on the stairs, and she wasted no time in replacing the map, shutting the lid of the chest as quickly and quietly as possible, and crouched behind the door. She projected an aura of invisibility, and took off out the door, through the portrait hole, and into the hall.

Draco scowled and swiped tendrils of blond hair out of his eyes. They’d been working for hours to clean and repair Hogsmeade, and half of the work had to be done without magic because of either the close capacity of students or the fact that the windows had been specially imported from Sweden. In all of the orderly chaos, he’d both lost sight of Granger and somehow gotten away from the main stores and out of the crowd.

He’d only done this to get out of classes, but he had not realized how much…well…work it would be. Malfoys did not work. They had others to do the work for them.

Hermione looked around her suspiciously, hand tightening around her wand. She had heard someone or something whimpering and it had seemed to be close, so she’d followed it without finding an adult. She was regretting that decision, as the whimpering seemed to be leading her toward the forest and away from the others. Hermione would have run back to get Hagrid, but the
thing sounded as if it might be in pain, and she didn’t want to risk losing it.

She’d caught flashes of something, red blood soaking into fabric (or feathers, or scales), and she busily told herself, in no uncertain terms, that this had to be one of the stupidest things she’d ever done.

But Death Eaters wouldn’t be back so soon, would they? And not out in broad daylight, right? Although it’s gotten to be a more common occurrence. But in front of Hogwarts? What if this thing is really hurt? Although we have gone rather far, haven’t we? Hermione was trying to rationalize away her fear, but she couldn’t let go of the feeling that she was walking into a trap.

That’s it, she told herself. I’m going back.

She turned around, only to find that she couldn’t. Something was compelling her to go further and further, as if she were the victim of a will-o-the-wisp. The noises had stopped, the glimpses of something gone, as if they realized that she’d caught on.

No! No! she screamed silently in her head, and tried to wrench herself out of the pattern that had grasped her. Slowly, inexorably, she was drawn away from Hogsmeade.

Hermione brandished her wand and began a spell to alert the others to danger when she heard someone murmur what must have been a spell. Her voice died in her throat, mid-spell.

If you take away a wizard’s voice, he’s already half defeated.

“How kind of you to join us, Mudblood,” a cold voice stated, sending chills down her spine.

Lucius! she identified immediately.

Four figures in black robes appeared before her. Her heart sank. How on earth was she supposed to defeat four full-grown and experienced wizards? Especially if she couldn’t use magic?

Suddenly Hermione found that she was freed from her compulsion and tried to run.

“Incarcerus!”

She looked over her shoulder, immediately casting the counter-charm, forgetting that she couldn’t speak. She dodged immediately, right into the path of another Binding Charm. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, but she refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

As the gathered near her she clenched her hand into a fist around her wand. It gave her some measure of comfort and hope, her only weapon.

No, she realized almost immediately. Not her only weapon. But she couldn’t reach her two knives.

“Who knew it would be so easy to catch the filth that has so far managed to evade us with luck?” asked one of Malfoy’s lackeys cruelly.

A booted foot lashed out at her wand arm. Hermione jerked away and cried out silently, her wand dropping from nerveless fingers.

“You’re nothing, Mudblood,” one of them hissed.

“Although she’s pretty enough, I suppose,” said another with a lecherous grin.

Hermione felt sick. God, no, she pleaded silently.
“Don’t get too attached,” Lucius smirked. “Our orders were to kill her as painfully as possible.”

No, no, NO! What would get her away, get her safe? They were advancing on her, and she scrabbled at the dirt futilely. Only one choice, based more on theory than actual practice. She’d have to reach for her wild magic, magic she’d spent seven years ordering and controlling and taming. She’d have to undo seven years of learning.

Do something! she shrieked at her magic with every fiber of her being, opening herself mentally to what she hoped and prayed would come. Anything!

They were coming closer and closer, and nothing was happening. Then the air around her began to quiver and glow. The Death Eaters hesitated, frowning at what was happening. Some instinct made Hermione close her eyes a moment before the world exploded in light. She screamed soundlessly as the light struck through her closed eyelids. She blinked away afterimages, suddenly exhausted.

The Death Eaters were stumbling around, cursing, but they wouldn’t leave her, not yet.

She lay on the ground limply, hoping in a detached manner that someone came before they killed her, and not after.

The moment Draco had seen the blinding flash of light, he’d grabbed someone, ordered him or her (he was in a panic and not paying attention to small details) to go get Hagrid immediately. Then he sprinted for where the light had originated, feet pounding against the hard-packed dirt, knowing intuitively that Granger had, once again, gotten herself in over her head.

“Stupid Gryffindor,” he muttered, bursting onto the scene. Death Eaters were slowly regaining their sight, but his heart almost stopped when he saw Hermione. Then he saw her shift and sighed in relief. She wasn’t dead. Not yet, anyway.

He performed the counterspell, and helped her into a sitting position before incapacitating two of the five Death Eaters.

Hermione scrabbled in the dirt for her own wand, and then shook her head in disgust. Useless! She couldn’t ask Draco to perform the countercharm on her voice while he was fighting. Where was everyone else?

“Traitor,” said a sneering voice in disgust, and Draco instinctively froze.

“Lucius,” he greeted coldly, trying to hide his fear. He didn’t want this, not against his father, not against the man who had taught him so much and so little. Not against the man he’d come to despise, while at the same time hoping he too could be changed.

He didn’t want any of this.

“You are weak,” his father said, circling him, like predator and prey. “You are no son of mine. When our lord has you, you will deserve all you get.”

A red haze seemed to descend over Draco’s vision, and he found himself screaming the Cutting spell.

It rebounded off of his shield and Draco jerked his head to the side. A thing red line appeared on his cheek, barely missing the eye. It seemed to release a dam, for Lucius sent spell after spell at his
son, most blocked, some dodged, but some hit.

“I appear to have been correct,” Lucius commented coolly. “You are no better than the Mudblood.”

At the reminder of Hermione’s predicament and the years of abuse he had suffered at the hands of this man, the hate inside of him began to boil. Draco felt as he would explode if he didn’t do something.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Another flash of light lit the area, this one green and not so bright.

Draco sank to his knees, staring at his father’s corpse. Lucius’ face was frozen in an expression of surprise, a slight lifting of the eyebrows, widening of the cold blue eyes.

Draco reached out a trembling hand; the skin was losing heat. “I didn’t mean to,” he whispered. He’d never meant for this to happen, never imagined he would have to do such a thing. “To kill… And the one who was my…I killed him.”

Hermione watched Draco in sympathy. She gradually became aware of the noise of many people running toward the area. Then a movement caught her eye.

Draco, watch out! she tried to scream, but no sound emerged.

Her two daggers found their way into her hands, and time seemed to slow down. Of the two Death Eaters left, one had begun to brandish his wand.

She threw her daggers, one after the other. The first scraped point first against his skull, drawing a howl of pain before dropping to the ground. The second buried itself in his back. The spell went wide, but not wide enough. It glanced off of Draco’s skull, and the boy crumpled.

How dare they? How DARE they! She ran to his body, tears streaming down her face. Death had never come to one of her closest friends, not yet. Hopelessly, her fingers felt for a pulse as Hagrid appeared, roaring in fury and knocking the last of the Death Eaters unconscious.

“Is he…dead?” asked one of the students with an audible gulp.

“’Mione,” Hagrid began, stepping forward to usher her away from the body.

She shook her head wildly, and motioned them to freeze. Then a smile of relief spread across her face. He was unconscious, but not dead. Not dead! His pulse was slower than she liked, but he breathed, his heart beat.

Hermione motioned for Dean to perform the counter-spell to Quietus. He caught on quickly.

“We need to take him to Madame Pomfrey,” she said, delighting in the sound of her voice. “He’s still alive, but only just.”
…Could someone deliver us?
And send us some kind of sign, so close to giving up
Coz faith is so hard to find…
-Nickleback, “Believe It Or Not”

Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labor and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.
-Arthur Hugh Clough, “Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth”

It’s a damn cold night
Trying to figure out this life
Won’t you take me by the hand
Take me somewhere new
I don’t know who you are, but I
I’m with you
-Avril Lavigne, “I’m With You”

It was only when Hermione was sitting down to rest, after the flurry and stress of getting Draco to the Hospital Wing and Madame Pomfrey running her tests, that the images of what had happened – more specifically, what she’d done – began to assault her. Darkness hovered at the edges of her vision and her stomach turned violently. She had most likely killed before, those few times the students had been called upon to defend the school. But it had always been far away, and she’d never been up close, never truly known that it was her who had killed. She’d never seen her victim up close, never watched him fall, never seen the blood (the blood, so much blood, pouring, pouring from the hole in his chest).

“I…I think I’m going to be sick,” she stated to the air in general with a slight quiver in her voice. A pan was sent to her just in time, and she heaved wretchedly into it. Her body shook, and she had a feeling her eyes were bloodshot when she looked up.

Madame Pomfrey was rubbing her back, murmuring soothingly. It may have been helping, but Hermione was in no state to realize such things, or even really care. The pan was banished, and Madame Pomfrey thrust a goblet of water upon her. Hermione drank, washing out her mouth. It was difficult to tell, but there might have been a slightly different taste to the water.

“Constant vigilance!” Moody roared in her head. She didn’t really give a damn, and simply allowed herself to sink back on the cot, into oblivion. The goblet tumbled from her hands, the last few drops of water and Sleeping Drought clinging to the rim.

“Poor dear,” murmured Madame Pomfrey as she pulled a blanket over Hermione’s sleeping form.

Once safely away from being discovered by anyone in the halls, and once again completely,
utterly, and hopelessly lost, Sakura decided to try out the map. She unfolded her own spare, blank piece of parchment, tapped it once with her wand to activate the portal view of the Marauder’s Map, and then tapped it again, murmuring, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Lines immediately appeared on the page, as well as the little dots that represented people. She was safe for now, as the closest person was several corridors away. Kakkui!

Now, where shall I go? she wondered to herself, and her stomach growled in answer. With a small giggle, she set off for the Kitchens to reload on food. It was ridiculously easy, not only to reach her destination, but to avoid others while doing so. She had the familiar discomfort of the house elves more-than-ready-to-do-anything-you-ask-for attitude, and found herself staggering under a large load of food. She decided to stop by the Library to see how Suppi was doing. They had been practicing spells earlier, so she had several stored in her wand at varying levels of difficulty. The difficulty of the spell was no that problem, it was the difficulty of the structure of the spell, and whether she managed to discover it or not.

“Spinel-san?” she called softly, tiptoeing toward the back corner where he usually studied the wizard texts.

“Good afternoon, Kinomoto-san,” he replied in his low cultured voice. He was pawing through a large dusty tome titled A Wizarding Historea.

“I brought some food in case you feel like eating,” she said, making sure that nothing she gave him happened to be a sweet. There was no telling what the students and professors would make of Suppi on a sugar high.

“Arigatou gozaimasu,” he said politely, and returned his gaze to the book. “Fascinating. Did you know that these wizards and witches descended from Druidism?”

“Really?” asked Sakura in a vaguely interested manner.

“Perhaps it was at the point of their split from Druidism that they spelled themselves against foreign magic. Or perhaps it was that spell that cut them off from their original branch of magic. It surely couldn’t be before, for the Druids know of the existence of other branches of magic.”

Sakura was very confused. “They spelled themselves? You mean as a whole group? Against other branches of magic?”

Suppi-chan blinked up at her for a moment, and then suddenly bowed. “Gomen nasai. A letter from Eriol-sama and Li-san a short time ago. I had forgotten that you had not had a chance to read it.” He handed her an ordinary envelope addressed to the two of them.

“Arigatou,” she murmured absently, and took it with her to her room where she would store her bag of food. After reaching her room and setting down the bag, she flopped down onto her bed, which was something of a mistake as there was only a sleeping bag between her and the stone floor. Rubbing a bruised elbow, she began to read, but was distracted by the series of rather gruesome sketches of Eriol being tortured and killed followed by a string of Chinese characters whose meaning was anatomically impossible and would most definitely not be found in a dictionary.

“Syaoran-kun,” she sighed, and began reading. She had to reread it twice before she felt sure that she understood it.

“Interesting,” she hummed, and sat for a while, letting her mind settle.

Sakura was then abruptly startled by something soft and furry appearing on her face. After a
moment of hyperventilating, she realized that it was one of her stuffed animals, sent, no doubt, from a certain mansion in England. “Very funny, Eriol-kun,” she muttered in a somewhat muffled voice, and would not have been surprised to hear a disembodied voice answer her. However, nothing of the sort happened, so she simply picked up the stuffed bunny. Rhiannon will like this, she thought to herself, and stood, stretching a bit before heading for the Infirmary.

Sunlight streamed through the windows, and flickering torches lit the dark corners the sun could not reach. Sakura seemed almost alone in this large stone castle as she plodded down the corridors, leaning against the railing as she glided down the stairs. At such peaceful times like this it was hard to believe in the presence of evil, the threat of pain and death. She could almost believe she was simply playing an elaborate game of hide-and-seek. They knew she was there, but not which room or closet, nook or niche she hid in. Sometimes it seemed she could stop this at any time, stepping out into the open, grinning cheerfully, and allowing someone else to take her place. Or maybe she would even simply disappear, leave the game altogether and watch from a distance as they scratched their heads in confusion.

The problem was, this wasn’t a game, and the presence of evil was only too real, hovering threateningly on the horizon.

As Sakura neared the Infirmary, she tapped her parchment, murmuring, “Mischief managed,” and then carefully stored it in her pocket so that it wouldn’t fall out. She checked herself over nervously one last time in case anything was out of place, and then entered the whitewashed room.

Almost immediately a harried Madame Pomfrey assailed her, and she froze in confusion.

“Oh good, you’re here. I didn’t know what class to send a message to, and Rhiannon hasn’t eaten since you left. I thought she’d eat if you were here. Would you mind taking this to her?” The nurse summoned a tray of food, the main meal being pasta.

“All right,” Sakura agreed, tucking the stuffed animal under her arm in order to carry the tray with both hands. Having taken a job as a waitress, she could have carried it one handed, but didn’t feel like taking the risk of spilling anything and drawing unwanted attention.

“Thank you,” the woman said in heart-felt gratitude, and bustled off to a corner that had been sectioned off from the rows of cots. “If you need anything, just call,” she threw back over her shoulder.

Sakura glanced curiously at the partitioned off area, and then walked over to Rhiannon’s bed. The girl had been paging listlessly through a comic book, but immediately brightened and sat up straighter when she heard Sakura’s voice.

“Hello Rhia,” Sakura said softly, setting down the tray on a small bed stand. “Madame Pomfrey told me that you weren’t eating. Why not?” Sakura had a sinking feeling that she knew the answer. Rhiannon had become too attached to her. Much too attached. She hadn’t noticed that Rhia’s condition had improved much too quickly, or had deliberately not noticed, wanting to believe that the child was almost recovered. She may have done harm where she only intended good; because Sakura was the one who had brought Rhia back from wherever she had been, she could only be able to act normally when Sakura was around.

Rhiannon looked down at her question, her long black hair swinging forward to obscure her face. “I just didn’t feel like it, I guess,” she said.

“Well,” Sakura said making an effort at being cheerful while busily berating herself for being so irresponsible, “are you hungry?”
“Oh…yes,” the girl replied with something close to surprise, and beamed happily at her friend. “I am.”

Sakura leaned over and placed the tray in her lap, sitting quietly while Rhiannon ate slowly. Once she was done, the sorceress placed the empty tray back on the bed stand. “I brought this for you,” she said, holding out her pink bunny to Rhiannon.

Rhiannon beamed, and hugged the stuffed animal close. “Thanks! I’ll keep him with me all the time, I promise.”

Sakura began hesitantly, “I hoped he’d keep you company when I’m not here. It might be a long time before I can see you again.”

The child looked stricken. “No, no, no,” she quavered, tears hovering on her lashes. “Don’t leave me too, don’t leave me alone.”

“Oh, imouto, you’re not alone,” Sakura murmured, hugging her close. “Madame Pomfrey is very worried about you, and I’m sure her assistants are, as well. It may take a while, but you’ll be up and about soon enough.”

“Will you die?” Rhiannon’s voice was shaking almost as much as she was, and muffled as Sakura felt tears soak into her shirt.

“No,” she with such conviction that Rhiannon believed her immediately. “It’s not my time or place to die. I can’t lose my life in this war between wizards.” As the Card Mistress and head of the society of sorcerers, it had been predicted that she would live a long life, centuries, perhaps, as Clow Reed had. They had not been able to predict how she would go, and Sakura was just as happy not to know.

“Will the fighting be done soon?” was Rhiannon’s next question.

“Yes.” The answer surprised Sakura, but when she allowed herself to stand back and dip into the immediate fate of this world, she found that it was true. Events were rolling like a boulder down a mountain, picking up speed as the ending came into sight. “Yes,” she repeated, “everything will be over soon. One way or another.”

Sakura stayed with Rhiannon until the child fell asleep, clutching her new present. She looked so innocent, so relaxed in sleep. Was that why fate had thrown this child at her? For the questions that would remind her of where her responsibilities lay? So that she would stand back after being too caught up in the lives of witches and wizards?

“Sayonara,” she murmured softly and stood slowly, making her way to where the nurse had disappeared.

“Hello?” she called out quietly, stopping in front of the plain white curtains. The fabric billowed outward and Madame Pomfrey appeared.

“Yes?”

“Rhiannon is asleep. I think she’s become too attached to me. She needs someone to talk to, who understands. Not necessarily a psychiatrist, but someone who can make her feel safe. I don’t mean to sound rude,” she added hastily.

“Oh, no dear, not at all. I understand; you’re simply concerned for the girl,” Madame Pomfrey cut in gently.
“If you can find anyone, it might be better to start as soon as possible. I don’t think I’ll be able to come back for a long while…” Sakura trailed off and avoided the woman’s searching gaze.

“All right,” she said with a nod. “I’d thought something along those lines when I saw how Rhiannon was when you left.”

Sakura smiled gratefully, and then turned her gaze on the curtain behind the nurse. “What happened?”

“That’s where we’re keeping Draco Malfoy,” Madame Pomfrey said solemnly, expecting her to know something about whatever had happened, Sakura realized. She hadn’t been among the student body for a while, and so had not heard the rumors.

“How is he?” she asked, figuring that would give her some information without attracting suspicion.

“Still in a coma, poor boy,” the nurse sighed. “He was lucky the curse merely grazed his skull.”

Sakura made the appropriate replies and then left. She’d spent enough time on her own. It was time to mingle with the students.

Yue had given Syaoran the news that Madame Hooch had been found, as well as the information he would need to find her. Now it was up to Syaoran to decide what to do. He had seated himself comfortably in a tree several yards above the camp where the Flying Professor was kept prisoner, and was now trying to decide the best time to free her. He had already decided the how, which involved the “borrowing” of a broomstick from a local store.

Night would provide good cover, but the creatures of the night were in general fiercer than those of the day. The witch was in no condition to fend off anything worse than an insect. The sun would keep most of the Darker creatures from following until sunset. If he and Yue could confuse the pursuers sufficiently, there was a reconnaissance group an hour or so away by foot. They could take care of her, and Syaoran would not have to escort her very far to find help.

He looked down at the Death Eater mask in distaste. The white thing was a mockery of their twisted souls. He had so often seen it stained red with blood. By all rights the smooth creation should be warped and black.

Syaoran looked up at Yue who had settled down several branches above him. “I’ll set her free and then send those who follow in the wrong direction before taking her southeast. Would you do me the favor of preventing any from following us?”

The Moon Guardian gave a regal nod, and Syaoran jumped lightly to the ground, heading with purposeful intent toward what passed as the dungeons. So long as he didn’t waver or hesitate, no one would stop him. His confidence projected the illusion that he was meant to be there.

He threw open the door to the witch’s cell after looking around at neighboring prisoners. None were in a fit state to escape, and even fewer could be healed without greater power than these witches possessed. And so Syaoran ignored the pain that flared at the thought of leaving those poor people to the machinations of heartless Death Eaters. Madame Hooch was hardly in any fit state to escape herself.

Syaoran threw open the door to the cell with more force than was necessary, so that it hung wide open. “All right,” he said in heavily accented English, moving toward her and purposely away from the door. His hands were up and obviously wandless. “It’s time for you to come with me.”
She regarded him with a sort of desperate hate, and he watched as the wheels in her head turned. Xiomara Hooch stumbled to her feet, but stayed where she was, her swaying becoming more pronounced, as she waited for him to move nearer, leaving her a better opening for a dash to the door.

She was a clever woman, Syaoran realized, and his respect for her grew. Right before he would have grabbed her, she threw herself forward, thrusting her good fist into his gut. Had it been anyone but Syaoran the blow would have winded them for a good few minutes. Barroom brawling, he thought in detached amusement as he doubled over, faking pain. She shoved him against the wall so that his head snapped into the stone. He managed to put a shield around his skull before it cracked open like an egg.

She’s not bad, he thought in surprise as she fled, hobbling on a bad ankle. Syaoran sent out a small spell to block the pain, and her pace quickened. The “dungeons” were near the forest. With any luck, no one would see her.

But as he neared the exit he heard the alarm sound, and cursed, joining the pursuit and quickly gaining the lead.

They hadn’t been going very fast, and once in the forest they slowed in confusion.

Xiomara looked down from her spot in the tree. It had been no small feat to climb, thanks to a broken wrist and fingers, but no one ever looked up. Her heart stopped when one of the taller Death Eaters met her eyes. Her hands shook; she could not go back, but her suicide pill had been taken, eaten by some idiot and good riddance. To her astonishment the man winked and then drew himself up.

“That way!” Syaoran shouted, pointing west. He paused long enough to make sure they followed his direction, and then looked back up at Xiomara. “Southeast,” he said, pointing in the correct direction. Then he disappeared into the forest.

Madame Hooch hesitated. Her brain buzzed with confusion as she slowly made her way back down to the ground. Could she trust the man? With the mask and cloak, she would never be able to tell if he was one of the few spies she knew. But it wouldn’t be, she realized guiltily. That was part of the knowledge they’d managed to force from her mind in all the time she’d been prisoner. Her face burned with shame. There was no reason he would save her, and then trap her; and even if it was a trap she deserved no less for the betrayal they’d managed to torture out of her. She would go southeast.

Syaoran followed her from the shadows. Every nerve sang with tension. The tracking animals would be brought soon, and Yue might not be able to head them off if he was dealing with two separate groups.

General Dillan Jones, head of the Australian force, dangled the offending object away from his body. A vein in his forehead twitched. His men (and women) seemed almost fascinated by that fact.

“The next person,” he growled, “who purchases Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, will be flambéed and serve as supper.

“Could we get that in writing, sir?” one of his lieutenants called out.

Others snickered as General Jones mock-scowled at the offending man. However, before he had a
chance to reply, a paper airplane zoomed toward him. He was about to rip it up before recognizing that it came from one of the sentries.

Unidentified person on a broom. Coming from the NE. Headed for us.

“Cloaking Charms up!” he ordered. His group immediately snapped to attention, the noise quickly dying away. He allowed himself a small smile. More of a twitch of the lips, really. Those he presided over loved their fun, but even then they were ready for anything. “Keep quiet and stay out of the way. Just because no one will notice you doesn’t meant they can walk through you. You, come with me,” Jones said, pointing at Angela, his second in command, and then strode the several meters to the sentry’s post.

The two of them crouched near the smaller man, named Matt, but known to most as The Cat for his silent, graceful movement.

“What do you make of that?” The Cat asked, pointing out a figure made small by the distance, and handed over his Spynoculars. The figure, despite weaving through the air drunkenly, was making fairly good time.

The general took a quick glance, identified her as a witch, and then passed the Spynoculars on to Angela, who had a much better eye.

“Tattered, filthy robe, exhaustion, and malnutrition,” she said at last. “My guess is that she’s been tortured for some time and has escaped only recently…ly….”

“What is it?” demanded Jones, watching her suspiciously as she trailed off.

She was silent for a few moments, straining her eyes as she focused on the area around the witch. “I thought I glimpsed a shadow following her. But now I see nothing.”

“Still,” General Jones decided, “the three of us will flag her down before she gets too close, and I’ll summon a replacement sentry.” A wave of his wand produced a misty, white bird-shaped form that disappeared in the direction of camp. As soon as they saw a wizard make his way to where they squatted, the three of them loped silently toward the witch.

Dillon and Angela stayed hidden in case she was a trap and Matt called out, “You! Come down and state your business!”

The witch looked down startled, and then dropped quickly, barely keeping the broom in check.

“My name,” she gasped, hanging limply on her broom, “is Xiomara Hooch. I’m a professor at Hogwarts.”

The general started slightly upon hearing her name, and his second-in-command looked at him quizzically.

“I would stand, but I’m afraid I’d collapse if I tried.” She gave a weak little laugh. “I just escaped from…from a Death Eater camp…about an hour…by broom…in the direction I…came…from.” She slid off her broom in a dead faint, but Matt caught her with his wand before she hit the ground.

“Let’s take her to the Medi-witch to deal with her injuries,” General Dillon Jones said, coming out from the trees. Keep watch until we’re sure there is no Polyjuice Potion involved. Then we’ll return her to Hogwarts and inform the Headmaster of the camp she escaped from.”

“There’ll be Death Eaters combing the woods. We should be going as soon as we can. I’ll tell the
company to pack up?” Angela said inquiringly.

He nodded, and they hurried back to camp.

Sakura wasn’t quite sure how she’d found herself trapped in this large, barely used room in some remote corner of the castle, and at the moment she was a little too occupied trying not to breath. The Headmaster (curses! It was always that too perceptive Headmaster!) and another man had practically run into the room, depositing a victim of some sort of violent mauling. She’d nearly given herself away when they’d first appeared; luckily they’d been preoccupied with the boy (so young; surely not even out of college).

Sakura had immediately become invisible, and plastered herself against the wall, trying to keep from being sick at the sight of all of the damage that had been rendered on the body.

“Greyback went too far this time,” the other man murmured, trying desperately to stem the flow of blood, and sew the skin together with quick flicks and twitches of his wand, as if trying to swat away a large pack of flies. “This is beyond my skill.”

“If you cannot heal him then our hope of discovering whatever this boy witnessed is lost,” Dumbledore said gravely.

At his words Sakura could hold back no longer. She was a healer, and it was against the very grain of her nature to prolong anyone’s suffering if she could prevent it. Perhaps everything would work out if she stayed invisible, kept away from the small group.

Under the cover of their spellcasting and curt discussions, she chanted the words of healing and recovering. Her words quickened and slowed, sometimes hardly above a whisper, sometimes barely audible. Slowly, unnoticed at first, the flesh and bones knit together, the blood stopped flowing, and his internal organs repaired themselves.

The two men had stopped talking to watch this phenomenon, and Sakura, the chant having ended some time earlier, slid back against the wall, watching silently for her chance to escape.

“It seems that you are a miracle worker,” Albus commented as a gnarled old man Sakura recognized as Alastor Moody entered the room, effectively stopping her from getting near the door.

“Much as I wish it were, that was not my spellwork. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Dumbledore?” croaked the ex-Auror.

“It seems,” he stated calmly, piercing blue eyes sweeping the room, “that our intruder decided to heal Phillips, for which I am most grateful.”

‘The intruder’ froze. With three men looking for her, even the smallest sound she made would be detected. Gods only knew what they’d do to find her.

Dumbledore drew his wand almost more quickly than the eye could see. A flash of blue light splashed against the wall before she could even twitch, just missing her ear.

Taking this as some sort of cue, the other two began shooting spells left and right. It was definitely too late to worry about not being noticed, so she tossed up one of her Cards. “Jump!” she said in strained voice, and leaped out of the way of an incoming charm. She leapt from wall to wall, her legs gathering under her, and thrusting against the stone wall. Up and up she went, nearly
reaching the ceiling.

Suddenly the memory of Eriol’s earlier advice popped into her head. Be one with the bunny.

I will kill him, she thought to herself, in a remarkably accurate impression of Syaoran.

Momentarily distracted, she yelped in surprise when a red light grazed her cheek.

“You fool!” someone shouted. “We want to catch it, not kill it!”

Oh, so now I’m an ‘it’ Sakura thought to herself hysterically, as she somersaulted through the air, landing lightly in the center of the room. She crouched low to the ground, watching suspiciously as Dumbledore’s gaze seemed to focus on the wall.

What – she wondered, and then her hand flew to her cheek. Her fingers came away wet with blood, and she immediately stood.

No. Suddenly she saw only the streak of her blood on the wall. She had no doubt that in wizardry, as in sorcery, such a substance as blood would tie the donor to the caster, willingly or not. With her blood she could be traced no matter how far she ran or how well she hid.

She leapt to her feet, her staff outstretched. “Watery!” she called out, as the Headmaster drew his wand. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. As soon as she called out the name, two wizards spun and flooded the place she’d stood with spells. Albus Dumbledore was fast, but not fast enough. Watery washed her mistress’ blood away so that none could harm her, and then returned to the card.

Sakura’s breath rasped in her throat as she once more leapt from one side of the room to the other. She thought she tasted blood. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and her blood pounded in her ears. Sweat beaded her brow as she fought to make her way to the closed door. It seemed that no matter where she went, against all odds the spells flew for her, thick and fast. Dumbledore was leading them, she realized. She hesitated, trying to examine how he could follow her without seeing her, and nearly got herself petrified in the process.

He’s…sensing…me, she thought disjointedly, trying to analyze how that was possible. I’m more…powerful. But how…? Witches and wizards, Sakura had found early on, did not sense auras any better or worse than those others they referred to as Muggles.

He must be…connected to something. The castle! The answer hit her with such suddenness that she staggered and dropped several feet before hitting the ground. Connected to the castle, he was able to sense the presence of anyone inside, though with such a large population it would tend to get confusing. However, her power was much stronger than any student or staff, and was therefore something that could be focused on if close enough.

She forced herself to keep moving. Now she definitely had to make it to the door, and she was only a few meters away. This time she used her Sight to examine the door and frowned. A locking spell coated the door. She didn’t know if she would even have time to shove it open, much less break through a spell. No help for it, she thought grimly, and took out another Card. “Firey,” she murmured, tapping it with her staff. The instant the doors burst into flame she changed direction and sprinted for the door, which was, fortunately, ash by the time she reached it. Unfortunately, the two men (or one, since Moody had been left to watch over the boy) followed her without hindrance. Also unfortunately, she was so tired that she tripped almost immediately.

In a lucky coincidence, she noticed that her hand had gone through an open door that was pretending to be the wall and staggered to her feet and through. Really, she thought, looking over
her shoulder for pursuit, if this was them simply trying to capture her, she would not want to see them pursuing someone to kill them. Although their suspicions were rather well founded, seeing that they had enemies everywhere. If this place was supposed to be a stronghold of the Light, it was probably somewhat disconcerting to find that someone they knew nothing of was spying on their lives. No wonder some of the wizards were paranoid.

Which didn’t help her in the least.

Sakura skidded around a corner and slid down the long banister of one of the main stairs, which would have been fun if she wasn’t trying to escape Albus Dumbledore, an extremely skilled wizard, too clever by half, and strangely familiar. The sorceress felt as if she should recognize him, though not necessarily as if she had seen or met him before. It was all very strange in an exceedingly strange, extraordinary, and dangerous business that was apparently becoming a part of her life. Joy.

Sakura stumbled a bit as her legs came into contact with the ground, and stumbled into a large group of students she had failed to notice. Apparently class had just ended.

Thank the gods, she thought, her knees weak with either relief or fatigue. In the middle of a group of wizards and witches, Dumbledore wouldn’t be able to sense her, and he certainly would not try to capture her. As she shuffled along in the center of the group she looked back to see the Headmaster standing motionless at the top of the stairs, seemingly to survey the students idly.

So familiar, she thought to herself shaking her head, and becoming visible as soon as the group was out of sight. Of course, none of them noticed, believing that she’d been there the whole time and had simply not noticed, not as different from Muggles than they would, perhaps, have liked.

Sakura straightened suddenly with righteous indignation as she recalled what had started the ‘game’ of hide and seek. What a way to thank me! she thought crossly, much to Eriol’s dismay when he contacted her some hours later as darkness descended.

“Itadakimasu,” she said in quiet irritation in her room, and bit into her dinner as a communications portal wavered into view. Sakura frowned as it established itself. Who on earth would be contacting her? Who on earth could? The feel of this person was familiar, in some ways similar to Eriol’s own power, but still distinctly different with the feel of a novice about it. When Tomoyo-chan’s face appeared, grinning triumphantly, Sakura accidentally inhaled a bit of chicken and went into a coughing fit.

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“Daijoubu, Sakura-chan?” Tomoyo asked concernedly. She’d wanted to surprise Sakura, since Eriol-kun had confessed that he’d only recently decided to give her the means to protect herself in a world of magic. She’d been practicing for a while now, first and foremost on invisibility at Eriol’s direction, and then attempting some of the smaller magicks that she remembered her friends sometimes warming up with.

It took Sakura a moment to reply to Tomoyo’s question. “H-hai,” she wheezed, delving into her pack for a water bottle and drinking deeply. “Daijoubu…. Tomoyo-chan?” she asked cautiously

“Hai!” she said cheerfully.

“When did you develop sorcery?” Sakura asked, deeply confused.

“Just the other day,” she replied airily. Inside she was bubbling with happiness. But poor Sakura. She had really been caught off-guard.

“Hai! Eriol gave me this,” she showed the Card Mistress the crystal bauble she wore around her neck, “and told me that it contained a portion of his power, and that I would be able to use it.”

Sakura frowned, trying to remember where she had heard about such a device before. She had studied it once, she knew she must have, but she could not even remember the name.

Tomoyo watched Sakura’s face quizzically. She had that expression on that told the girl that she was trying to remember something that had been forgotten. Tomoyo watched as a steady thumping from behind her caught Sakura’s attention.

“What’s that? Is someone coming?”

“No, no one ever comes into the Room of Records after hours,” Tomoyo replied and spared a glance over her shoulder at where Clow’s half-reincarnation had been working. “That’s just Eriol hitting his head against the wall.”

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Doushite?” asked Sakura.

“We haven’t been able to find the records of any of the Death Eaters, and we’ve been concentrating our efforts in this room for the past two days. There are plenty of newspaper articles about them, but now records.” Tomoyo’s mind drifted to the man named Sirius Black. Roughly 17 years ago he’d appeared in the paper as the killer of a hero and innocent Muggles, and was reportedly sent to Azkaban without a trial, which Tomoyo, despite the overwhelming evidence provided, felt somewhat uncomfortable with. Then he’d reappeared in the papers five years ago as the only one to escape from Azkaban. More recently his name had been cleared, but only after his death. She felt a deep sadness for the hell that poor man must have gone through.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“We’re not quite sure where-”

Thunkalunk.

“Oww,” said a weak voice.

Sakura strained to look behind her cousin, trying to see what had happened. Tomoyo broke off and spun around. Her gaze skipped over Eriol, who was flat on his back, dazed, with a lump the size of a goose egg on his forehead, and landed on a secret drawer that had shot out of the wall. One of the papers drifted near enough for her to read ‘Bellatrix Lestrange.’

“Oh!” Tomoyo exclaimed cheerfully. “He found it.”

Sakura barely heard her. She’d suddenly remembered what the risks and effects of a brilae, the transference of power to a magicless person, were. And if she was irritated before, she was nearly murderous now.

“Tomoyo,” she said calmly. “Could I speak with Eriol-kun, please?”

The violet-haired girl cocked her head, very aware of the change in her friend’s emotions. “Hai. Eriol-kun,” she called to the boy’s prone figure. “Sakura-chan wants to talk to you.”

Eriol groaned as he dragged himself over to the communications portal. “Don’t worry,” he
muttered. “I’m absolutely fine. Getting hit by a heavy drawer doing 30 is no big deal.”

“Did you make Tomoyo a brilae?” Sakura asked without preamble.

“Hai. To protect her,” Eriol said breezily, wincing as he gingerly prodded the lump on his forehead.

“And I’m sure you tested her extensively,” Sakura said venomously. If the brilae and the host were incompatible, the result was often painful, and in extreme occasions ended in death.

“Of course I did,” Eriol said vehemently, and not altogether truthfully. He doubted that he’d tested Tomoyo as extensively as Sakura would have liked, but he’d known her and witnessed her unique characteristics for some years. Had she possessed magic, she would have been a formidable force. Simply because he’d only performed some of the smaller tests was no reason for them to yell at him.

Sakura instantly deflated. “Good. If she’d been hurt by this…” She trailed off and refused to think about what could have gone wrong. Suddenly the memory of her day returned. “Be on with the bunny??” she shrieked. “That was your advice for me??”

“Now, Sakura,” Eriol said uneasily, glancing back to see Tomoyo already immersed in the files. “Let’s discuss this later. I need to get back to work,” he said, and quickly shut communications down.

He sank to the floor in relief. Rarely had he seen Sakura truly angry, and he was far too disoriented to play her denseness to his advantage.

“Find anything?” he asked of his partner.

“This one’s strange,” Tomoyo said, puzzled, and handed him the folder. “It’s written much more hurriedly than the others, and I’m not strong enough in English to read such difficult handwriting.”

Eriol glanced at the label. Written carefully in black ink was the name ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle.’ Next to it in messy handwriting and a different shade of black ink were the words ‘aka Lord Voldemort,’ obviously written at a different time. Clow’s half-reincarnation stared at the name for a moment, and then whooped with joy at their luck.

“This is it, Tomoyo,” he said excitedly. “This is their Dark Lord. I doubt it provides anything like an extensive report, but whatever is in here will definitely help us.

Sakura sighed and slouched down as Eriol shut down the portal. She simply couldn’t stay angry for long. Not unless those she loved were threatened or insulted.

I need a walk, she thought. I need to stretch out. The thought of simply walking around the castle without worrying about learning more, more, more about the wizards appealed to her, relaxed her. Sakura quickly donned her student cloak and strode out the door. It wasn’t yet curfew, so she would mingle with the students who were still wandering the halls.

She headed in the general direction of the main hallway, sometimes hovering on the edge of conversations as if she belonged there, although she had nothing to comment on. She greeted Professor Flitwick casually as they passed in the main hallway. The flickering flames were soothing, and she simply walked on. Without realizing it, she wandered into alleged Slytherin territory near the dungeons. Raucous laughter broke her out of her reverie, and she looked up at two younger, unpleasant looking boys startled.
“And who are you?” the shaggy brunette sneered. The other boy sneered as well, but it was obvious that he was simply a tag-along with the other Slytherin, one who easily faded into the background.

Sakura resolved to be polite and get away as quickly as possible.

“Alex,” she replied simply. “And you?”

“Charles von Humbrington,” he replied arrogantly. “No doubt you’ve heard of my noble, Pureblood family.”

Sakura smiled blankly.

He examined her, and smirked. “No doubt you are one of those Mudblood Hufflepuffs.”

“A what?” Sakura asked startled.

His grin broadened in an unpleasant manner. “So you are one of those disgusting Mudbloods. Was it your mother that was the whore?”

Sakura froze, and for the first time in her life understood what it meant to see red. Never had anyone said such a thing to her. When she came to her senses Charles was backed against the stone wall with Sword at his throat. He showed none of his arrogance; his eyes spoke of fear. He was a coward, a bully who preyed on the meek. He obviously knew that he’d gotten in far over his head this time.

“If you ever,” she hissed, and was cut off by an angry bellow.

“What is going on here?!” demanded Snape, his black robes billowing around him. He seemed to tower with rage, and Sakura froze, barely registering von Humbrington’s tagalong cowering behind the Slytherin Head of House. Snape’s words were like a bucket of cold water, and she gasped as she realized exactly what she’d done. Quickly she used Illusion to disguise the Sword returning to its card. To the three wizards it simply seemed as if the sword faded, like one of their illusions.

As soon as the weapon disappeared, Charles collapsed and pointed a shaky finger at Sakura. “Sh-she att-ttacked m-me,” he blubbered. “She w-was going t-to kill me!”

Sakura stood meekly, watching the professor out of the corner of her eyes. There was no way she’d be able to get out of this one without a major spellcasting. What on earth had possessed her? The way she’d snapped…it wasn’t like her at all. She’d done the worst she possibly could have done. True, no one had ever spoken to her like that before, but…

“You, come with me,” the Potions Master said blackly, and grabbed her by the robe. “We’re paying a visit to the Headmaster.”

Sakura’s thoughts raced in several different directions at once. Calm down, she told herself. Deep breaths. Hiding unnoticed was a bonus, not a necessity. Think. What should I do?

It took several minutes for the Card Mistress to feel somewhat in control.

First off. Disguise yourself. Something subtle since you’ve already been seen, but sometimes the smallest changes have the greatest effect.

She immediately stood straighter, giving the illusion of greater height. She used a glamour to make
her hair several shades lighter, so that it could almost be called a sandy blonde, and her eyes took
on a slightly bluer cast. Her skin became paler as well, and her features slightly sharper, more
defined. The overall effect created something similar and yet different than her true appearance.

Severus Snape was too furious, and the lighting too erratic, for him to notice.

Sakura knew she didn’t have much more time before they reached Albus Dumbledore, the one
man she tried to avoid, and the one she kept bumping into. She needed to decide on a strategy.

For that she turned to her time among the kitsune.

Throw them off guard. If they’re too clever, if they know too much, they’ll expect you to deny the
truth. They’ll try to trap you. Do the unexpected. Run around the truth gracefully, weave the
dance until they don’t know what is false and what isn’t. Leave them on their toes until you
manage to extricate yourself from the situation.

Sakura had never been very good at deception, but now she needed to draw on whatever she had.
Her accent, she realized, would mark her right away. She’d need to slow things down, minimize
the fact that English was not her native tongue. Sakura doubted that anyone who had lived in
foreign country for seven years, as her alibi had been, would not pick up the accent and subtle
nuance of the language.

Sakura paid little attention as Professor Snape snarled the password for the Headmaster’s office to
the gargoyle. She was attempting to prepare herself for this new ordeal.

“Onee!” questioned Dumbledore as the younger man marched Sakura to his desk, black eyes
glittering.

The old wizard looked from Sakura’s pale, meek face to Severus’ furious scowling one.

“Onee drop?” he offered serenely.

There was a pause. Sakura blinked. This man could have been a kitsune in his past life.

“Albus, be serious!” Severus burst out. “This girl threatened the life of one of my students!”

Dumbledore’s gaze sharpened. “Is this true?” he asked.

Deep breaths. Tell only the truth. Lies can tangle you up, and this is one wizard who would most
definitely have some sort of object that would enable him to spot a lie.

“I wanted to terrify him for saying such a thing about my mother.” Sakura bit her lip and looked at
her feet.

This is acting. You are a good actress.

Dumbledore studied her, and then nodded. “I will handle this, Severus.”

He glowered. “I want her punished.”

“And be assured she will be, but first I wish to know the extent of her transgression.”

Snape bowed his head, looking not at all happy – but then he rarely did – and left the room.

Sakura suddenly realized that the Headmaster didn’t know her alias, and gently sent the
information into his mind.
“So then, Miss Smith. Have a seat.”

Sakura sat down in an overstuffed armchair near the fireplace, and settled herself comfortably, tucking one leg underneath herself.

“Lemon drop?” Dumbledore offered once again.

Sakura shook her head. “No thank you,” she murmured, suspicious of what sort of potions might be in them. She took a moment to look around, and the Headmaster simply sat back and let her. It was such an interesting room with odd, clanking silver instruments and knick knacks.

“Miss Smith, would you care to explain to me what exactly happened?”

Sakura recognized this as an order, not a request, and truthfully recounted what happened.

“…And then I let the illusion disappear,” she finished carefully. “I’m somewhat skilled at illusions.”

“Then Mr. von Humbrington was never in any danger?” he questioned sternly.

“He was in danger of being hit,” she muttered, and was startled by Dumbledore’s surprised chuckle. “I didn’t meant to say it…out loud,” she said in chagrin. So far so good. Aside from that last slip she hadn’t said anything too bad, and he hadn’t yet begun to quiz her for information. She hadn’t yet given herself away.

“May I inquire as to why you took the insult to such an extreme measure?” Dumbledore asked gently.

“Maybe because my mother died when I was little. I never really knew her, but my father would tell me stories all the time. And sometimes my mother’s cousin tells me stories as well.” Sakura stopped, startled. She hadn’t meant to tell so much. She felt suddenly alarmed. Had he managed to cast a spell on her when she wasn’t paying attention?

She looked around quickly with the Sight, and concluded with some relief that it was simply his kind, charismatic character that had her confiding things to him. His half-moon glasses puzzled her, however. They were layered in spells, and nearly blinded her. Squinting, she was barely able to make out the spell she was looking for, and laughed a bit. There was a truth spell on his glasses. The wizard raised an eyebrow.

“Just a funny thought,” she explained.

“There is the matter of your punishment for threatening a fellow student,” he began.

Sakura sank back in the chair and relaxed. She was almost free.

Suddenly she shivered, and her skin crawled. She extended her aura quickly and carefully, and soon saw the one witch who knew her coming quickly. Sakura straightened immediately, causing the Headmaster to look at her with a concerned frown.

“May I be excused?” she gasped, trying not to panic. Seeing his doubtful look, she added, “I’ll come back later for my punishment, but right now I’m not feeling well.”

The fire flared, and Sakura slumped in her seat, surreptitiously trying to stay out of sight of the woman’s head in the fireplace. Too late.

“Albus?” McGonagall called out tiredly. Sakura noticed the dark bags under her eyes and the
ashen, exhausted pallor of her face, and wondered what she had been doing while the other
women pretended to be her.

“Ah, Minerva. Have you recovered from your illness already? You were hardly yourself these
past two days,” Albus greeted pleasantly.

She grimaced, eyes darting around the room. “More or less,” she agreed. Her eyes finally alighted
upon Sakura’s still form. “You look familiar,” she murmured, and then shook her head. “Forgive
me, I’m still tired. Of course you look familiar. You are a student.”

Sakura relaxed, relieved. She’d passed the test. Tabby-chan didn’t recognize her.

“Why don’t head for bed? Tomorrow we can discuss what happened with Mr. Longbottom.”

An irritated expression flickered across Minerva’s sharp features. Sakura caught her wondering
mentally what Tonks had done to him, or vice versa.

“And if I may be honest, you look awful my dear,” Dumbledore concluded.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” she muttered dryly, and disappeared.

“I apologize for the interruption,” he said cheerfully, returning to Sakura. “You were saying…?”

He knew perfectly well what I said, she thought confusedly. “Nothing important. They were just
cramps.” She flushed a bit as she said this, and then realized with horror that she’d just outright
lied. To keep from babbling something incriminating, Sakura leaped to her feet and examined a
nearby perch with interest. “What sort of bird do you own?” she asked with interest.

“What a bird do you own?” she muttered dryly, and disappeared.

“I’ll let you see for yourself. It builds character, or so I hear.”

Sakura blinked. She’d never heard that before.

“His name is Fawkes, and he’s just returning from delivering a letter,” Dumbledore added.

Sakura heard a harsh, unearthly call, and turned towards the Headmaster’s desk where a bird
seemed to materialize in a flash of fire. She caught a brief glimpse, enough to identify the creature
as a phoenix, before it was upon her. She heard a horrified voice cry, “Fawkes!” as she barely
brought her arms up barely in time to protect her face.

She bit her lip until it bled and moaned as the wickedly sharp talons sank deeply into her forearm.
Someone was trying to restrain the bird, she realized dimly, as the wings battered her head. He
realizes that I’m an intruder, and a true danger to his charge, she thought dazedly.

Albus Dumbledore’s wand was out and pointed at his dear friend, trying to calm him. This had
never happened before in the whole time he’d had Fawkes near him. It was as if he saw an enemy
far more dangerous than any other in this little girl.

Suddenly an unsteady, gentle crooning began, the notes almost unworldly. Almost immediately
the phoenix stopped his assault and gently withdrew his talons. He emitted the phoenix equivalent
of a purr and rubbed his beak once over her shoulder before making the short trip to his perch and
settling down. He still did not trust her enough to heal her, but there were few things in the world
that a phoenix would cry for.

Sakura’s knees buckled as Albus Dumbledore seemed to materialize at her side. Her arm bled
freely, coating her skin with blood and soaking her sleeve. Tears clung to her lashes, and she
trembled as the Headmaster gently drew back her sleeve to bare the wounds to open air.
“I am deeply sorry for this,” Dumbledore said sorrowfully. His look also conveyed curiosity and wariness. “Fawkes has never done such a thing before.”

“Don’t worry,” Sakura managed. “I don’t blame him. After all, I was a stranger in your private office.” Her breath hitched as his wand brushed against one of the holes the talons had left in her arm. She had spoken to the phoenix in the language sorcerers used to speak to magical creatures who were unable to communicate clearly to humans. She’d only been able to remember a few phrases, and so Eriol had drilled the most important ones into her head, one of which said, very roughly translated, she was the leader of the sorcerers and spoke as a friend. Luckily it had been enough for this Egyptian phoenix. Had it been a Chinese phoenix, a Feng Hueng, she would have been able to communicate more clearly, in Japanese or the elementary Chinese she knew. But then, Feng Hueng would have recognized her as a sorceress immediately. Apparently the Wizarding World was separated in such a way that even its creatures had difficulty recognizing a sorcerer.

Sakura sighed as much of her pain disappeared, and glanced down at the bandage Dumbledore had conjured. Then she frowned down at her sleeve and the mess she’d made.

“I’ll clean it,” she said quickly with a hint of panic in her voice as Dumbledore made a move to scourgify the blood. She did not want to chance that her blood would bind her to any witch or wizard. She mumbled some sort of nonsense words under her breath so that they wouldn’t be heard, and silently called upon Watery. A stream of water jettisoned out from her wand (or so it appeared), and washed the floor clean. Dumbledore frowned, and studied her speculatively, the manner in which she washed away the blood almost too similar to earlier that evening to be coincidence.

Next Sakura deftly tore off her shirt sleeve and called up Firey in the same manner she had called its opposite. The fabric was soon engulfed in flames, and all traces of blood had disappeared.

“Perhaps it would have been advisable to send the robe to the laundry,” the wizard suggested.

Sakura blinked. “Oh. Yes.”

“Shall we continue with this act, or shall we speak frankly?” he asked suddenly, catching her off balance.

“Wh-what?” she asked uneasily.

“Come, come. There are no Alex Smiths in the student files, nor even any Alexandra Smiths. Of course, there is an Alex or two, and several Smiths, but no combinations of the two, I’m afraid. Unless you’re 33 years old and visiting from Armenia, in which case I apologize.”

Throw him off guard. He knows too much. Think, Sakura, remember deception.

Unfortunately, he had thrown her off guard, and she spent precious moments gaping when she should have been thinking of a way to get out of this situation.

And then something even more unfortunate happened next. Sakura could feel herself freezing up, and her eyes widened. She struggled desperately to free herself from what was to come, but couldn’t. Not here, not now, she thought unhappily. Not him. Albus Dumbledore, who had been watching her, found he could not look away from her eyes. He felt himself sinking into bright green pools drawing him under and away from all he knew and thought he knew.

Afterwards he was never able to describe exactly what he felt that day when he caught his “glimpse of Fae,” as Tomoyo said, but he did remember the power. A well of power as old as
time filled to the brim and overflowing. He had thought that there was very little left in the world that would shock him so completely. It lasted a moment, an eternity, and then he found himself back in his body.

“What are you?” he asked quietly.

Sakura stared for a moment and then shook her head, giving him an impish grin. Now it was her turn to take charge, while she still had the chance.

“Why Headmaster, I’m hurt. My heart bleeds at the injustice of your implication that I’m not human.” Sakura was not quite sure that made sense, as she was not good at complicated English words, but was sure she had gotten the point across. “You wound me deeply,” she said, arranging her face into an unhappy expression, and placed a hand over her heart.” She’d found her rhythm for the moment, and hoped her inspiration and adrenaline would not run out before she’d escaped.

Her actions startled a laugh out of Dumbledore, and he looked slightly less shaken.

“Of course I do,” he replied. “I must admit to being curious as to why you are running around my school.”

“Isn’t that what students do?”

“Are you a student?”

“You seem to think that I’m some sort of evil, all-powerful witch.”

“Are you?”

“Not at all.” Sakura looked around for the door, suddenly tired and wanting nothing more than to be away from this wizard who saw too much. “It’s becoming late, and there is a curfew, isn’t there?”

He said nothing, but made no move to detain her. He simply watched her curiously as she slipped quickly out the door. Sakura was surprised that she’d gotten away so easily. Halfway to her room the fact that she’d just given herself away sunk in and she began to shake.

But then he hadn’t found out about her, not really. Only known what face to put behind the presence in his school, and an incorrect face at that.

Sakura let go of the glamour as she opened the hidden door to her room, and she appeared as herself again. “Kero-chan,” she said unsteadily upon seeing her guardian waiting for her.

“What’s wrong, Sakura?” Kero asked in concern as she began to cry. The day had been too much for her.

Sakura hugged him close as if he were a stuffed animal, and told him everything.

“Was I supposed to tell him, Kero-chan?” she asked quietly. “Was this my one chance? Does this change everything? Magnify their distrust? Were the gods trying to get me to tell him? But I didn’t want to jeopardize Tomoyo-chan and Eriol-kun and Syaoran-kun. I didn’t want to tell him until we all agreed it was time.”

“Calm down Sakura. There’s plenty of time to tell them, you know. And even if you slipped, it’s not like it’s a matter of life and death, or anything. Even that Chinese gaki would understand if you were unable to stay hidden. You probably have the most difficult job of all.”
“Thanks…Kero….” Sakura murmured sleepily, her eyes closed.

“Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll go let the others know what happened. You just relax.”

“‘kay,” Sakura mumbled and immediately fell asleep.

“Poor kid,” Kero said to himself as he wiggled out of her limp arms. He brushed his paw against her cheek, concerned, and then took off into the night.

There was a knock on Minerva’s bedroom door.
She stirred and opened her eyes blearily, not bothering to put on her glasses.
“Go away,” she growled, and immediately drifted off to sleep.
The knocking came again, more insistent.
Muttering under her breath she fumbled for her wand where she kept it on the bed stand and cast a hex in the door’s general direction before closing her eyes.
Her door opened and Albus walked in.
“Minerva?” he called, turning on the lights.
“Albus go away. I just got back and I haven’t slept in two days,” she hissed into her pillow, vastly disappointed that her hex had failed.
“Minerva, please. It’s about our strange intruder and Miss Smith.”
Minerva reluctantly reached for her glasses and sat up. "What?” she demanded testily, and then blinked. “This isn’t the work of Death Eaters, is it?” she asked fearfully.
“I have several reasons to think that this is not,” he reassured her. “But be wary of Miss Smith. If you happen to notice her, call for me immediately.”
She stared at him fuzzily, and then shook her head. “Talk with me at length in the morning. I have some important news for you as well, but not urgent.”
Albus nodded and turned to leave. “Be careful, my dear. Good night.”
But Minerva was already fast asleep.
About an hour before dawn Sakura was shaken awake. She mumbled something unintelligible, and then, upon remembering where she was, sat bolt upright.

“Hoe!”

She looked around frantically, afraid that she had been discovered, only to spot what seemed to be a black stuffed animal shaking its head.

“Gomen nasai, Spinel-san,” she apologized profusely, leaping over to where she had flung him.

“Iie,” he said dizzily. “I’m all right.”

It took him a moment to recover, and then he straightened and delivered his message. “There is a tree spirit waiting for you on the edge of the forest. She says that she has something of interest to show you in regards to the Dark Lord.”

“Arigatou. I’ll leave at once,” she said, gathering her wand and wrapping herself up in a warm cloak. Within moments she was traversing the grounds of Hogwarts, walking quickly to warm herself up. She easily sensed the spirit’s aura, and headed directly to where she waited.

A tall, willowy creature appeared, skinnier than was humanly possible. The skin was dark and rough like bark, and she was dressed in new, bright green leaves as befitted the spring season. Its hair was made of thin twigs, the mess reminiscent of a birds nest. Her eyes were large and bright, the yellow of the dying leaves in the fall.

“Good morning, Card Mistress. I am called Rowan.” The creature’s voice was low and beautiful, and Sakura thought her own voice was harsh in comparison.

Sakura bowed in return. “Good morning Rowan. I’m sorry if I’ve kept you waiting.”

“Not at all,” she replied, “but we must hurry.”

“Should we fly then?” Sakura paused. “Can you fly?”

“No, but I can keep up in the trees. I’ll stay on top so you can see me.”
Sakura nodded, not at all doubting the spirit’s word. She cupped her hands around her necklace. “Release!” The key lengthened, growing larger until she plucked her staff out of the air and gave it a casual spin. A pink card slipped into her hand, and she tossed it into the air. “Fly!” Soft, white wings sprouted between her shoulder blades, and she took to the sky easily.

Rowan bounded from tree top to tree top like quicksilver, and Sakura’s wings flashed in the light of a nearly full moon as she followed. She revelled in the freedom of the open air after so many days spent hidden in a stone castle. Her thoughts wandered, and a revelation came to her.

Magic had become a tool for the witches and wizards, Sakura realized. A tool taken for granted. They took no pleasure in the casting of a spell and rarely savored the results. For sorcerers magic was an art. With the beautiful and complex spells and rituals it was difficult to take sorcery completely for granted. Sakura was afraid that she was beginning to lose her appreciation; it was little comfort that wizards and witches were worse off in that regard.

Magic could never be the miracle it was meant to be for those brought up in wizard households. A wizard or witch brought up in a Muggle household entered the Wizarding World in wonder, enchanted by anything and everything. But after using a wand day in and day out for mundane study and learning, as well as being ridiculed by fellow students, they lost this awestruck view.

Sakura found parallels with this and it upset her. Though she enjoyed flying with her own wings, it never retained the innocent, wide-eyed, simple joy of her first time using Fly. Only two events came close: when she had first taken Tomoyo flying and experienced it anew from her friend’s point of view, and when the wings truly became her own, when she no longer needed to ride her staff.

She wondered what would happen if the wizardry suddenly failed. They would rue its disappearance and realize how they’d taken it for granted, but only so far as a screwdriver, having lain on a night stand for months, would be missed when massive and desperate repairs were needed.

Perhaps there were a few witches and wizards for whom this would be untrue, some color in a gray landscape, but the vast majority overruled them.

Sakura stopped short, nearly overshooting the tree Rowan had settled on, as she had been paying minimal attention. She settled on a lower branch that the spirit had gestured at, and examined the small group of Death Eaters.

“They’ve been doing this off and on for the past two months,” murmured Rowan.

The three Death Eaters were hunched over, chanting constantly as they wove their wands through the air. Sakura used her Sight to follow their magic, and stifled a gasp. Yards and yards of the forest floor were covered in what appeared to be a large magical net. She examined it closely from her perch, and even more closely from the ground when they vanished half an hour later. No matter what she did or how she Looked at it, it refused to yield up any answers. Nowhere in the spell did she see the power input, and without power the spell was completely useless. Nor could she figure out what the net would do.

Tired and frustrated, she finally gave up, thanked Rowan, and flew back to Hogwarts, landing out of sight of the castle. She sighed tiredly as she trudged across the grass. Students were no doubt rushing through breakfast, but she didn’t have the energy to join them. She needed to write letters to Syaoran and Eriol, but she didn’t have the energy to do that either.

She stumbled up to her room and immediately fell asleep.
“He looks so familiar,” Eriol murmured fervently to himself, resisting the urge to strike his forehead with the heel of his hand, as if that would dislodge the information he sought.

“Hai,” Tomoyo said sleepily, stifling a yawn. “You’ve said that at least a dozen times. If that’s all you’re going to say, I’m going back to sleep. I only just got to bed at 8:00.”

Eriol had shaken her awake close to noon and told her in a hushed voice to come with him. She’d hastily willed herself invisible, and then stopped to make sure that she’d done it right, as she was rather tired and very new to being able to work magic. Eriol waited with a certain stiffness that bespoke of impatience, until she was ready.

Eriol bit his lower lip, staring intensely at the visiting Hogwarts Headmaster, who was deep in conversation with an auror. They’d positioned themselves so that the elderly wizard was facing them. “What about you?” he whispered. “Does he strike you as familiar?”

Tomoyo frowned, cocking her head to the side as she examined him. “Maybe…a little,” she said hesitantly. “But not to the extent that you seem to recognize him.”

She jumped as the auror slammed a fist down on his desk in fury. “Merlin’s beard!” he cursed.

Eriol’s eyes lit up in revelation. “Ah,” he breathed.

“Nani?” asked Tomoyo.

He didn’t reply, but she felt the tiny shiver pass over her skin that indicated magic had been used. When she noticed Dumbledore’s gaze become fixed on a point over her shoulder, she turned quickly and saw that Eriol had become visible. His enigmatic smile firmly in place, Eriol bowed elegantly. Tomoyo followed his lead and easily dropped her invisibility, sweeping a gracefully curtsy in her long, violet dress. She blinked out of view soon after Eriol did and quietly returned with him to their sleeping area, leaving Dumbledore bemused and the auror surprised and almost fearful.

“I see you have some, too,” Tomoyo heard the Headmaster comment, no doubt thinking of Sakura, and she threw back her head and laughed.

“What was that?” she asked once they had safely made their way back to the Room of Records.

“What was what?” Eriol asked innocently.

“How was Dumbledore-sensei familiar?”

Eriol smirked. “Dumbledore,” he said, “is the host of Merlin’s soul.”

Tomoyo raised her eyebrows. “Ah, but what does that mean?”

Eriol shrugged. “Nothing really. Well, unless Merlin wakes up. He’s been trapped in a tree, sleeping an enchanted sleep for centuries. I do wonder what would happen to his soul, though. Wouldn’t that be interesting, if two people inhabited one body? Or if one of them had to wander about without a soul….” He trailed off at Tomoyo’s warning look. She had recognized the glint in his eye.

“People with power find the soul’s host familiar, and often the person or events in the person’s life are in some ways similar to Merlin and his life. Interesting, but nothing important.”
Tomoyo yawned. “Hai. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m going back to sleep.”

When Dumbledore returned from the Ministry he immediately sought out Minerva, who had retired to her rooms after lunch.

“Minerva?” he called, knocking lightly.

“Hello, Albus,” she said, opening the door.

“Well, this is a nice change from last night,” he said with a chuckle. Minerva blushed faintly.

“I was exhausted,” she said with a scowl. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“No,” said Albus softly. “Neither of us are. But that is neither here nor there. I believe we have some things to discuss. Shall we?” He offered her his arm, and she took it without hesitation, following him to his office.

“You know,” he said as they walked, “Xiomara has been found and is recovering in the Infirmary.”

“Truly?” Minerva grinned, very much relieved to hear that her friend was safe. Albus watched her, smiling softly at this rare relaxed view of his Deputy Headmistress.

“She stumbled onto a group of Australian wizards as she escaped,” he informed her quietly. Minerva glanced at him sharply. “What is it, Albus?”

He chuckled and lowered his voice, after glancing around the empty corridor. “You know me too well, my dear. Someone disguised as a Death Eater helped her. Even if I had forgotten that there was a spy in that particular camp, I am sure that I would have been informed before action had been taken.”

“Yes,” his companion replied absently, frowning in thought. “I see what you mean.”

“This is hardly the only strange occurrence, but perhaps we should save this conversation until we are in private.”

“Of course,” she said, and they walked toward the gargoyle in companionable silence.

Once they had gotten settled, Minerva began to relate Ruby Moon’s visit to the camp. Albus leaned forward, listening intently as she described the creature she had seen and the conversation she had overheard.

“Japanese?” he said, leaning back to ponder this. “How very unusual…. Do you know, Minerva, strange things have been happening ever since…”

“Ever since I returned from Japan,” she realized, startled. “But that would mean that Sakura…”

“Must have something to do with this,” the Headmaster finished. “Did you notice anything at all out of the ordinary?”

Minerva frowned. “Neither she nor anyone I saw performed any sort of magic. I’m not even sure Sakura could. But,” she continued slowly, “there were small things. They didn’t treat me quite like an ordinary cat. Sakura and her boyfriend were completely confident when faced with Nott and the other two. But they had no idea what a wand was.” She paused, thinking. “And when I left,
Dumbledore focused on her last words. “But why would she think an injured cat found in her hometown would belong across the world in London?”

Minerva stared at him, her mouth forming a silent ‘oh.’ “It never occurred to me to ask that,” she said.

“Perhaps I should tell you what transpired while you were gone,” Dumbledore said, and did so, beginning with Severus dragging in a girl who went by the name of Alex Smith, and ending with the sudden appearance and disappearance of the two children in the Ministry.

“Both of them had an Asian look about them. The boy was fairly tall with blue hair and glasses.” He looked at her, but she shook her head.

“I never saw anyone who goes by that description.”

“The girl had long purple hair that ended in ringlets.” He stopped as she leaned back, shaking her head, this time in disbelief.

“Albus, that sounds like Sakura’s friend, Tomoyo Daidouji.” She looked at him, desperate for answers. “But what does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said, at a loss. “Did you get a good look at Alex Smith last night?”

She paused, thinking. “Yes, I did.”

“Did she look at all like Sakura Kinomoto?”

The two images suddenly connected in her mind, and she sucked in a breath. “Yes. Her hair was a few inches shorter, and there was something about her that was different, but yes. It was Sakura.”

Albus nodded. “Images can easily be altered, even for Muggles, and this girl is definitely no Muggle.”

“But what is she? And what is to be done about this?” Minerva demanded.

“I have no idea what she or any of her friends are. I suspect that they are trying to find out something about us. For the moment, I don’t think we should do anything. We wouldn’t want to cause undue panic, and they have not proved themselves to be any sort of danger. That aside, I’m not sure there is anything we can do.”

Minerva had never seen Albus look so helpless. She put her hand on his and said quietly, “They’ve done nothing but help so far as we can see. Let’s just sit back and see where this goes.”

Albus Dumbledore’s eyes followed her as she stood to leave, and he stared at where she had been long after she had gone.

Sakura woke around lunch time, still tired but more functional, and braved the student body in search of food. She ate and made her way to the Library without incident and sat down to quietly discuss her early morning adventure with Spinel in a deserted corner. Neither could come up with any explanation, but he helped her pen the needed letters to the two boys.

She then returned to her room, brought out the materials she had asked Eriol for, and sat staring at
them, considering. Upon receiving them, she would have immediately gone to Lupin-sensei with the means to turn his curse into a blessing. However, her gut instinct told her to wait, and so she had.

Tonight perhaps, she thought. Or the night after. Then we’ll see what happens afterward, when he reveals me.

She was surprisingly calm about this, but then, she had something else on her mind.

Someone was coming.

And she had the feeling that she had been waiting for this person.

Sakura looked down at her clothes, wrinkled from being worked in and then slept in, and made a face. I’ll shower and change into one of Tomoyo-chan’s more extravagant creations.

But first, a nap.

Whoever it was, he or she wouldn’t be here until later in the evening.

Eriol sat back studying his now-finished map while Tomoyo read Death Eater records. Small round stickers marked the places where Ruby Moon and Yue had reported Death Eater camps. They were spread throughout the British Isles, forming the suggestion of a circle. The ones further inland, however, definitely seemed to be surrounding something.

Hogwarts.

There was no doubt in Eriol’s mind that sooner or later one of the major battles, if not the final battle, would be fought at Hogwarts. It would very likely be the deciding battle. One way or another.

He turned once more to Sakura’s letter that Keroberos had brought in earlier before heading back in the direction of Hogwarts, complaining loudly, with another letter for Syaoran.

“Tomoyo, dear,” Eriol said pleasantly, still looking at the map. “I think it’s time we stepped up your training.”

Tomoyo looked up, raising an eyebrow at his back. “How much time do I have?”

“We won’t know until Syaoran replies, but I would say sooner rather than later.”

“Well then,” she said, standing and stretching. “Let’s get started.

Syaoran stood away from the Death Eater camp, arguing quietly but vehemently with Kero.

“What the hell does he mean he wants their attack plans now?” hissed Syaoran.

“Hey, kid, I’m just bringing you his note.”

“Baka nuigurumi.”

“Chinese gaki.”
“What the hell.” Syaoran ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Okay, their commander, or general, or whatever he’s called hardly ever leaves his tent. I’ll create a distraction, you slip in there, find the plans, and memorize when and where of the important ones at the very least.”

“Why do I gotta do it?” Kero complained.

Syaoran just glared. “That’s his tent,” he said, gesturing at it. “Be ready.”

He sprinted away before Kero could reply.

There was a loud boom and within moments a large crowd of Death Eaters gathered to stare at a golden winged lion and black winged panther fighting fiercely. Syaoran was hidden among the group and concentrated on his illusion, nerves singing with tension. The illusion of Kero and Spinel in their true forms spewing fire at each other and burning trees was fascinating to watch. Spells couldn’t touch them, and Syaoran even remembered to create the feeling of intense heat radiating from the flames.

Several minutes later, near exhaustion, he allowed the illusions to fade away and hoped that the real Kero had had time to accomplish his task.
You wanna wave the wand,  
Time and troubles gone.  
If the music enchants you, enhances your mind,  
Fine.  
I'll play along, I'll sing the song,  
Then you can dance all night, all night long.  
-“Pay the Piper,” Pay the Piper, Jane Yolen

And nobody knows  
What’s gonna happen tomorrow  
We try not to show  
How frightened we are  
-“What Happens Tomorrow”, Duran Duran

“Touya, I’m sure Sakura-chan is perfectly fine. There’s no need for you to fly across the world just to check on her when she’s been calling home regularly,” Yuki tried to persuade him.

It didn’t work. But then, it hadn’t all week.

Yukito sighed. “Be careful,” he said softly, grinning at him. “And don’t forget to have fun and leave your sister alone every once in a while.”

“Sayonara,” Touya said, a rare smile on his lips.

His boyfriend watched as he went on through the security check point, before leaving the airport. Touya continued on toward his gate, and settled in, having a good two and a half hours left until he boarded. He had just settled into a spare seat with his book when he heard a voice speak his name. “Touya.”

He looked up at the floating figure of a young woman before him, able to see through her if he concentrated. She looked worried. “Okaasan?” he murmured.

“Be careful,” she warned him, reaching out to touch his cheek briefly. “Something is coming.”

Touya nodded slightly, so that those around him would not think him too crazy. His mother disappeared and he mentally ran through what he could do with what little power he had to arm himself with. He had little authority or power to handle anything important, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying.

Suddenly something flared at the edge of his senses.

Almost immediately the screaming began. He shot to his feet, as so many around him did, and narrowed his eyes at the walkway. He was unsure what to make of the beams of colored light he saw stray past the gate until they connected with walls or pillars with an audible boom. Clouds of dust and rubble shot into the air, as the travelers around him joined the throng of people fleeing the source of destruction.
He gripped the back of his seat, almost thrown off his feet by the force of the panic of the mob around him. When the gates were mostly emptied he vaulted over the rows of chairs, against the flow of the crowd. There was magic involved in this, and he had to prevent any innocent people getting hurt.

He heard them before he saw them, listened to the voices raised and wild with bloodlust. In English, with British accents. His blood ran cold, and he felt, immediately, that Sakura had become mixed up in whatever the hell was going on.

Then he saw them, five black-clad, nightmarish figures emerging from the smoke and dust. He saw one of them toy with a woman, and he gave no warning cry, simply charged. He used his momentum to slam his fist into the nightmare’s stomach, no doubt causing serious internal damage, and then kicked the hand that held the woman, adding enough of his magic so that the bone would break. The figure shrieked with a woman’s voice (he could not tell gender with such voluminous robes and masks). The captive bolted away from the fray as the group recovered from their surprise.

One of them aimed what looked like a stick at him and shouted something in a foreign language. Touya knew enough not to judge by appearances and recognized the deadly intent, so he quickly twisted to the side. The magic just barely grazed his arm, drawing a thin line of blood.

It was very possible that he would die here. He recognized this, and concentrated only on fighting, pushing away any thoughts on failure.

He quickly brought both of his hands back against his side, fingers like claws around a ball of light. Then he thrust his hands out in front of him at the three that were grouped together. The light shot forward, for all intents and purposes burning their spells before they reached the sorcerer, slamming into the three and sending them flying backwards several yards.

They landed and didn’t get up.

The remaining two stared at him as he assumed a fighting stance, hands still glowing slightly from the spell he had just used.

Touya was completely drained, but he kept his expression carefully neutral. He could still use his martial arts training, of course, but any sorcery would be lost to him for at least a day. He wouldn’t be able to do more than dodge anything they threw at him.

His bluff worked. They disappeared, taking their three fallen comrades with him, and Touya sighed in relief, and allowed himself to relax. His whole body ached, the result of using more power in one go than he usually used in a week. After all, he was a low-level sorcerer whose main talent was to see spirits. He saved his power for emergencies.

Touya frowned down at his cut and peeled his sleeve back to examine it. Despite all of the blood it was hardly fatal and had nearly stopped bleeding already.

It was a pity about his shirt, though.

His mother appeared before him, looking worried. “Daijoubu? Are you hurt?” She flitted around him, as if trying to examine all of him at the same time. “Oh! You’re bleeding.”

“Daijoubu,” Touya reassured her. “I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Her spirit looked troubled, for a different reason. “Something else is coming. You should get away quickly.”
He nodded his agreement and jogged back to his bag, shouldering it before hurrying to a nearby deserted exit. Nadeshiko easily kept pace. “I’ll warn your father,” she said as he slipped through the door, and disappeared.

Touya frowned in concentration, as his mind quickly sifted through what this unprovoked attack might mean. The flight would be delayed or canceled as the airport staff attempted to sort out the damage and its cause. He had more than enough time to go home and return later, and Touya had a strong feeling that whatever Sakura was doing in England was connected with those English… whatever they were.

Touya hurried to find a taxi to take him home. Otousan definitely needed to be told about this at any rate, and they would have to find a ticket for him as well.

Card Mistress or not, Sakura was in so much trouble.

It was a while before Syaoran felt a little less like passing out if he moved, and even longer before the last of the Death Eaters gave up the search for him. He slid clumsily out of the tree, rather amazed he’d been able to keep hold of his branch in the first place, considering how exhausted he was from such a detailed and prolonged illusion.

“It’s about time,” Kero scowled when Syaoran finally found him.

Syaoran simply sighed. “So?” he asked.

“We have two days. The night after tomorrow the four closest camps will be attacking Hogwarts.” Kero frowned. “There was something strange…”

“Nani?” Syaoran asked impatiently.

“Well, the rest of the Scottish and English camps were supposed to converge on this remote point on the northeastern coast. But there’s nothing there.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” the Chinese sorcerer sighed. “Take this information to Eriol as fast as you can. Maybe he can make heads or tails of this. His mind is twisted enough. Then warn Sakura about when to prepare for the attack.” He massaged his temples, feeling a headache coming on. “I’m going to rest, and then see about some sabotaging.”

Kero left with a few parting comments that Syaoran, for once, almost managed to ignore. He gave in at the last minute, unwilling to part without rude mumbling in Chinese.

Sakura entered the Great Hall that night, guessing that whatever was going to happen would likely take place in a large and public place. She decided to be a Gryffindor for dinner, and took a seat near Harry. The avert spell was firmly in place, so that even if the students paid no attention to her, they wouldn’t try to sit on her.

She nervously fingered the hem of her sleeve. If ever there was a time that she wanted to avoid notice, now was it. Not only were the teachers wary and on guard, the formal clothes she had chosen did not blend in with the school uniform. Sakura wore a sleeveless, red silk Chinese dress, with a phoenix embroidered in gold thread, and a slit up to her hips on both sides. Beneath the dress she wore a thin white shift with very large sleeves that belled out at her elbows. The legs of her slacks were wide and billowing, meant to look like a dress. Sakura mentally thanked Tomoyo for the layers and cloth that was warmer than it was meant to be. Nights in England were cold.
Sakura let her hair hang free, and the only sign of adornment was the necklace that held her Key, and the ever-present bracelet of bells that Tomoyo and Eriol had given her. Despite her formal appearance, Sakura was ready to move quickly if she needed to.

Dinner seemed to last forever, her curiosity desiring fulfillment. She wanted to know who she felt she was supposed to meet. Sakura was twitchy throughout dinner, picking at her food as her eyes constantly scanned the crowd.

She sighed, disappointed as the first students stood to leave. She didn’t know where to look now that dinner was nearing its end.

Suddenly the Great Hall doors opened silently, the light of the setting sun streaming in, and the students who had been about to leave sat back down.

Nice entrance, Sakura thought wryly, and craned her neck with the rest of the student body to see who it was.

A middle-aged man dressed in a woolen brown robe made his way down the center aisle with the help of a gnarled wooden staff. Shaggy brown hair streaked with gray was pulled back with a leather tie, and he carried a strange bundle over his shoulder.

Sakura nodded to herself. This was definitely the person. She could feel his strangely soothing power, and wondered what sort of magic user he was. Her eyes, and the rest of the school’s, followed his progress to the professors’ table. Sakura noticed them eyeing the stranger with suspicion, and, in Snape’s case, outright hostility.

“Greetings, Albus Dumbledore, professors, students,” he said, facing the Headmaster. His words were heard clearly throughout the enormous room, though he did not seem to raise his voice. “My name is Bran. I am a bard, and I thought I might drop by and entertain, since I was in the neighborhood.”

Sakura grinned at the phrase.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow as whispers broke out. “That would be quite an honor if it were true. But in these modern times, bards are rare and identify themselves only for important matters.”

“True enough. I was sent by the head of our Order to bring to light a prophecy that we have had in our keeping for quite some time, concerning certain people in this hall.” He turned to look over the student body.

Harry was unsurprised when Bran’s gaze turned towards him. He frowned when the man’s eyes seemed to focus a little too low to meet his eyes. Then he noticed why.

Bran was blind.

And yet it didn’t seem to be coincidence that he had looked Harry’s way. The Boy-Who-Lived pondered this as the bard’s gaze swept past him to Sakura.

Bran focused on Sakura despite her spell. He seemed to both sense and see her. He knew who she was and where she was, and she understood that this message was for her to remember.

“As for my…credentials, I suppose I shall just have to show you.”

A small harp emerged from his bundle, smooth and well-worn with use. Sakura noticed several people, not all of them professors, tense as if prepared to defend themselves. She spared little
thought for them, her attention firmly fixed on this bard. He ran his fingers lightly along the strings of his harp, and then slowly picked out a reverberating melody. Sakura fairly vibrated with the energy that first radiated from the strings. He was calling on something very old.

The air seemed to glitter around the bard, his sightless eyes closed in concentration. They streamed from his fingers on the harp and flowed upward in a spiral from the floor at the foot of the professors’ table. The air seemed to coalesce until, in a burst of bright light, a golden oak tree, in full bloom, rose through the stone floor of the Great Hall.

Bran gave a dramatic bow to his stunned audience. “I believe you know the tales, Headmaster. Should any pretender attempt to mimic this ritual, the gods will strike him down. Does this satisfy you?”

“It does.” The Headmaster beaming like a child who had gotten away with dessert before dinner, Harry noticed in bemusement. “Would you do us the honor of delivering your message?”

The quiet wave of voices quieted, all attention on this mythological figure come to life.

“It would be my pleasure,” Bran said gracefully.

A stool appeared, and Harry swore that it was the same stool that appeared with the Sorting Hat at the beginning of every school year. He turned to Hermione to ask her to explain what was going on, but she hissed at him and elbowed him sharply in the ribs. He groaned, rubbing his chest, and decided that it would be much safer to wait until later.

He looked up to see that the man had settled himself onto the stool, his instrument resting on one knee. Then he began to play….

Eriol breathed deeply, in for four beats, hold for four beats, out for four beats. Tomoyo’s presence next to him as she, too, practiced meditation receded to the back of his mind. The murmuring of the last employees left in the building disappeared, and he emptied his mind. Slowly, he allowed thoughts to drift briefly through his consciousness, simply waiting for what he was searching for.

There was something he needed to remember.

He sat unmoving for nearly two hours, and then sighed, slowly allowing the world to assault his senses once more. However, he made no move to stand. Rather, he examined the girl seated next to him with his senses. Unsurprisingly, she seemed to be having no troubles with meditation. He recalled Sakura’s constant fidgeting and occasional inattentiveness fondly.

Eriol gathered up his magic, and sent it arrowing at Tomoyo. He felt her flinch, but a purple shield blinked into existence. It was a little sloppy, and used more power than necessary, but it was very good for someone who had only begun to use magic.

She opened her eyes and gave him a look. “You had better have been prepared to draw back if I was too slow.”

He grinned and stretched. “Of course,” he lied.

Tomoyo gave him a knowing look.

“So, did you remember what you needed to?”

Eriol sighed. “No. Hopefully it will pop up again. I have a feeling that it was fairly important.”
Tomoyo grinned. “Getting forgetful in your old age?” she teased, laughing as she leaped out of the way of his spell, and returned one of her own.

The melody was unlike any song Sakura had ever heard. While not exactly unpleasant, it did not seem to flow smoothly. The prophecy was meant to be remembered, and the music was definitely memorable.

Then Bran began to chant, and Sakura pushed aside anything that would distract her from the words.

“When the Lord of Cruelty and Death is birthed again –
At once stronger and weaker than before –
The world will hover in twilight, either dawn or dusk before it,
And the Isles will be steeped in darkness.

From the world opposite –
The Land of Eight Million Gods – will arise three and two,
Both human and not.
From the city will arise one and two,
Both human and not.
A multitude of hosts follows this tribe,
A power seen and unseen.

When the Fruit Tree blossoms in the north
With the Wolf standing guard –
When the Trickster spreads his wings over the south
With the Halfling at his side –
When the Trickster’s Bride finds the separation –
When the Guardians, old and new, band together for one common cause –
Then shall the world dare hope, for the end is in sight,
And the darkest hour is just before dawn.
But, ultimately, the Boy must battle the Man,
For neither can live while the other remains.

Two roads lie before you, both littered with strife
Where life begets death, and death begets life:
One leads to loss and forgetfulness, and the slow building of a bridge between peoples.
One leads to suspicion, fear, and awe, an age of gods and ancient powers.

Beware the choice.”

Sakura locked this into her memory, very glad that her magic would allow her to recall every word. The last notes faded into silence, and the students looked at each other in consternation, attempting to puzzle out the riddle.

Then Bran’s fingers plucked at the harp in a distinctly cheerful melody, and he settled back, prepared to provide entertainment for the rest of the evening.

Sakura smiled happily, and relaxed for the first time in what seemed like ages. She allowed herself to live in the present, to simply take in the warmth and companionship of the inhabitants of the castle.

Afterward, while Bran stayed to speak with the professors, Sakura followed the rest of the student
body out of the Great Hall, and lingered in the shadows under the stairs, the doors to the Great Hall in her immediate sight. She sat comfortably on a ledge carved into the wall, and settled herself in to wait for the area to clear out. The professors eventually began to exit. The Headmaster and his Deputy were the last to leave, speaking animatedly with the bard. Sakura cringed and pressed herself as deeply as possible into the niche, as the Headmaster’s gaze began to turn in her direction.

Bran chose that moment to direct a comment at the Headmaster, distracting him, and Sakura sighed in relief.

“I must say, your songs do portray sorcerers in a much better light than most of our myths do,” Minerva commented curiously.

Albus nodded his head in agreement. “Only our oldest manuscripts portray sorcerers in the roles of protectors. I have always been suspicious about why opinions changed so drastically, no matter that they are legendary beings. It was very enlightening to hear those few ballads.”

“I find that it is best not to take stories at face value,” Bran replied, with a small smile.

The Headmaster nodded his head gravely, and Professor McGonagall murmured, “Indeed.”

“I hope that you will accept our hospitality for as long as you wish to stay,” Dumbledore offered.

“I wish I could accept, but I must be on my way,” Bran said regretfully. The two professors were puzzled by the depths of sorrow his posture portrayed, as it was impossible to read anything in his blind eyes. It seemed to be about much more than a simple inability to spend the night at Hogwarts.

“If you are sure,” Minerva said at last.

“Very. But I am truly sorry.”

“It is no trouble at all. I don’t remember the last time this school has been in such good cheer;” Albus said wistfully.

“I was happy to be of service. Music is, after all, my life. You needn’t worry about me. I can show myself out.”

“If you insist,” the elder man acquiesced. “It was very nice to meet you.”

“Thank you very much for coming,” Minerva added.

Bran seemed to watch for a moment as the witch and wizard head up the main stairs, arm in arm. Then he spoke, desperately trying to suppress a grin.

“Arigatou gozaimasu, Dumbledore-sensei, McGonagall-sensei. You two make a wonderful couple.”

Sakura squeaked.

They had stopped and spun to face him as his Japanese registered. Minerva was hiding a blush, while Albus focused his full attention on the fact that Bran seemed to know what was happening lately.

Bran hid a grin when the wizard shifted protectively to place himself in front of Minerva, and simply bowed. “Good night professors.”
The Headmaster seemed about to start back down the stairs, but then, as he had been doing so often lately, he simply let it go.

Sakura waited to make sure that everyone was truly gone as Bran sat on the steps to carefully pack away his harp. She was just about to emerge from her hiding space when she noticed the bard turn his head to the right. In a moment she heard what he had: footsteps.

“What are you doing down here, Harry Potter?” Bran asked softly.

Harry froze. “How did you know it was me?” he asked cautiously.

“There are ways of seeing without the use of eyes,” the man replied. “Is there something I can do to help you?”

Sakura shifted so that she could see Harry’s face as the Boy-Who-Lived said with a bitter laugh, “I don’t think so.”

Bran nodded, his hands bringing out the barest whisper of music from the strings of his harp almost without meaning to. “It is a heavy burden that has been given to you, Harry. But you should know that there are always people around to help you. You have many friends who will gladly help you bear your burden if you would let them. Don’t go shoving them away simply because you are afraid for them. They knowingly and willingly made the choice to stand at your side. Do them the courtesy of allowing them to make their own choices.”

“I do,” Harry protested, more calmly this time. The music had a soothing effect, Sakura noticed.

“Most of the time, yes,” Bran agreed. “But sometimes you become lost in yourself and push them away.”

The two sat in silence for a time as Harry considered this.

“Now,” the bard said, standing and stretching, “I believe it is time for you to return to your rooms, and for me to take my leave.” His sightless eyes seemed to seek out Harry’s, missing by only a few inches. “Prepare yourself, Harry Potter. They will be coming sooner than you think, and you must be ready.”

The boy was puzzled and somewhat alarmed by Bran’s parting words, but he knew a dismissal when he heard it, and headed up the stairs with a quiet, “Good night.” He was about to turn down the hallway when he chanced to look back at the bard and blinked in surprise at the girl he saw standing with him in Asian dress. He was tempted to stay, but something seemed to prevent him from lingering, and he headed quickly in the direction of the Gryffindor rooms.
Take Up Your Arms

Chapter Summary

Because I could not stop for death he kindly stopped for me, or paused at least to strike a glancing blow with his sky-blue mouth as he passed. A lightning that cannot strike twice, our lesson learned in the hateful speed of light. A bite at light at Ruth a truth a sky-blue presentiment and oh how dear we are to ourselves when it comes, it comes, that long, long shadow in the grass.
-“Adah,” Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible

A sword of fire and an axe of cold
Vision of the Sibyl has foretold
Armies gather on the battle-plain
All will fall and earth will die in flame
-“Freya,” Age of Winters, The Sword

Live or die, live or die? they chorused. Mother May We?
-“Adah,” Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible

Once Harry had left, Sakura emerged from her hiding spot. She and the bard took a moment to examine each other.


“How… J-just Sakura, please,” she stuttered, embarrassed, with a bow of her own. “It is very nice to meet you.”

“Sakura-sama, then,” he said with an approving nod, and flashed her a smile. “I am honored to meet you. I do hope I did not create trouble for you with my teasing of Headmaster Dumbledore and his Deputy. I suppose you could say that I have something of a Trickster in me.”

Sakura sighed, and waved his concerns away. “They have guessed I was here almost since I first arrived.” She grinned sheepishly. “I’m not much of a spy, I suppose.”

“I’m sure you just need some practice,” Bran reassured her.

“That’s kind of you to say,” Sakura replied skeptically. “Ano, thank you for delivering the prophecy.”

“It was no problem at all,” he reassured her. “It’s actually sorcerer-oriented, but I thought the wizards would find hope in the words. You do know that the deciding battle will take place soon?”

“Yes. Eriol told me before dinner that the plan was to attack the night after next.”

“Make sure that you are prepared, Sakura-sama.”

Thinking back to her meeting with Remus Lupin, Sakura nodded. “There are still a few things left to do, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to fight. I-I’m not a warrior.”
“Just stick with your strengths, Sakura-sama. I’m sure you’ll do the best you can, and that will be enough. There is one more thing that I need to tell you. The Queen of the Sidhe reminds you that the history of these islands protects the forces opposing this Dark Lord Voldemort. When this happens, simply let it happen.”

“Will I recognize it when it happens, Bran-san?” she asked worriedly.

“I’ve no doubt,” he replied with a wry grin. “After all, such a thing will assuredly be a very uncommon occurrence. And now that my job here is done,” the bard said, stretching, “I must take my leave.”

“I shall miss you,” said Sakura, reluctant to see him go.

“And I you,” Bran replied solemnly. “But remember that I go gladly, of my own choosing, and that good will come of this.”

“Wha…? I don’t understand.” Sakura was confused and alarmed by his too solemn words and sad, yet peaceful countenance. “Why…?”

“You will,” he interrupted, and bowed deeply once again. “I am very glad for this chance to meet you, Sakura-sama.”

The blind bard turned and made his way to the doors and out of the castle. And as Sakura watched, the sound seemed to fade from the world around her, and though his staff hit the stone, she could not hear the tapping it should have made. For a moment her world consisted only of his staff and the hard stone floor, and a complete lack of sound, as though she had suddenly become deaf.

She blinked and the moment was gone, the faint sound of wood against stone growing faint. She watched him go with a sense of deep foreboding. Shaking herself, as if to dispel the feeling, she made her way gracefully up the stairs, the hem of her elegant under dress sweeping out behind her. Sakura headed toward her room, deep in thought about what she had learned from Bran when she ran into Dumbledore.

Or, more accurately, happened to see him emerge from a room further down the hall with his back to her, but, nevertheless, she panicked. Stumbling to a halt, Sakura slammed such an extraordinarily powerful notice-me-not spell down on herself that she nearly gave herself whiplash. Wincing and stretching out her muscles, she slowly inched closer to the Headmaster, who was bidding good night to…

Sakura peeked around the doorframe. Ah, of course. Minerva.

She smiled to herself as she thoughtlessly trailed Albus Dumbledore. Really, those two were so kawaii!

And oblivious.

Honestly, thought Sakura. I’m the one who is supposed to be clueless.

The crooning of a phoenix interrupted her inner monologue, and she blinked, looking around to see where her feet had taken her. She promptly had another panic attack upon realizing that she had followed Headmaster Dumbledore back to his office. Did the man ever go to sleep? Thankfully, she had such a powerful notice-me-not spell in place that Syaoran would be hard-pressed to find her.

Taking advantage of this, she stepped closer to the older man, watching carefully as he carried a
stone basin full of shining liquid to his desk. Next he put the tip of his wand to his temple, and then pulled away, drawing a shimmering strand of something with it. Sakura muffled a squeak. Not that making a sound would make a difference, but it was a habit.

Guiding it to the bowl, he gave the contents a quick stir before drawing up the memory of the prophecy. Sakura gasped when an image of Bran, as he had appeared earlier that night, hovered above the liquid, once again reciting the prophecy.

“The Man and the Boy, that’s straightforward enough,” he murmured. “Those lines reference Sybil’s prophecy. But is the war almost over? Voldemort will be gambling everything the night after next. Does that mean the people who herald the end are here? But who?”

Eriol had, somehow, managed to get Syaoran’s information to Dumbledore via the Potions Master without arousing suspicion. A seemingly impossible task, yet done all the same. Eriol refused to reveal his secrets, of course.

“Perhaps the demon girl is one of them,” Albus mused with an amused chuckle.

Sakura huffed in indignation and, seeing that there was nothing left for her to see, quickly made her way back to her room, stopping by the library to pick up Spinel Sun, who followed her curiously.

“Oh good, you’re here Kero-chan,” she said relieved. “Do you know where Yue is?”

“He and Ruby Moon finished their job for Eriol and are hangin’ out at Hiiragizawa’s place,” he replied, voice slightly muffled by the food he’d found in Sakura’s bag. “Well!” he exclaimed upon seeing Sakura properly. “You’re dressed up all fancy. Finally getting rid of that Chinese gaki?”

“Kero-chan! Don’t be mean. I felt that something important was going to happen, so I dressed accordingly. Now.” She clapped her hands sharply and gathered her focus, calling Eriol and Tomoyo first since she hoped to use his mansion.

“Ah, Sakura-chan,” Eriol greeted, looking up from his intense study of the papers spread around him. Several colored pens lay near his knee, and Sakura could see the many notes he’d made on his notepad. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Records?” she asked, taking in the mess.

He shook his head. “Battle plans.”

“I’ve been delegated to Death Eater records,” another voice spoke. Tomoyo entered the room, in the midst of braiding her thick hair. “Hello Sakura-chan.”

“Hi Tomoyo-chan,” Sakura greeted happily. “I have important news.”

Eriol’s intense blue gaze focused immediately on Sakura.

“A bard visited Hogwarts this evening,” she continued, “and delivered a prophecy. It’s actually sorcerer-oriented, he said. I thought we could meet at your mansion to discuss it.”

Kero and Spinel, who had been listening to the conversation, traded curious glances.

“He also had a reminder from the Queen,” Sakura added.

Eriol practically vibrated with curiosity. “Of course you can use my home. I’m very ready for a break.” He glanced ruefully down at the mess he had created.
“We woke up less than an hour ago,” Tomoyo pointed out, amused.

Sakura grinned and inserted herself back into the conversation. “I’ll call Syaoran, and then meet you at your house.”

“Will you be able to get back inside the wards again?” Tomoyo asked worriedly, having been told of her original attempt.

“Yes. I’ve had contact with the castle, and it shouldn’t be a problem anymore,” Sakura replied, wincing inwardly as she remembered a small fragment of her essence accidentally tied to the castle until, over the years, it would fade.

“You were careful?” Eriol questioned.

As if you are one to talk, she thought amusedly. “Yes,” she replied out loud.

The sorcerer caught her amusement, though, and gave her a mock frown.

“See you soon. Ja mata,” Sakura said in parting, and allowed the image to fade away.

“What was that about?” Kero asked aggressively. “What prophecy? And what was that bard thinking, revealing it to witches and wizards?!”

“I would assume because it involved this world somehow,” Spinel said, giving the Guardian Beast a disdainful look. “And we shall find out when we get to Eriol-sama’s home. You ignorant oaf,” he added as an afterthought.

Sakura ignored their bickering and concentrated on Syaoran.

“Hello Sakura,” he said tiredly, giving her a weary smile.

“Syaoran,” Sakura murmured, concerned. “Daijoubu?”

“I’m just tired. I’ll be fine after I sleep,” he replied. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your communication portal?”

Sakura’s lips quirked, and she explained the situation.

“It’ll be nice to get a break from camping out,” Syaoran acknowledged, and left.

Sakura sat quietly for a moment after letting the image fade. No ranting, not one word spoken or face made about being in the same house as half of Clow’s reincarnation.

She entertained the notion that the two sorcerers were getting along, and sighed, stood, and gathered Kero and Spinel to her before summoning herself away to London.

Syaoran must be truly exhausted, she thought worriedly as her dark stone room became lighter, airier, and made of wood.

“Sakura-chan!”

Sakura quickly braced herself in time to be glomped by Nakuru.

“Still so cute. And Suppi too!”

“Who is Suppi?” grumbled the miniature winged cat.
By the time Sakura convinced the hyperactive girl to let go of her, she saw that everyone had settled down and were watching her expectantly, with the exception of Mizuki-sensei who had returned to the temple she had been visiting before being called away.

Quickly, she recited the prophecy and then wrote it down on a spare sheet of notebook paper, a welcome change from the parchment at the school.

“The ‘Land of Eight Million Gods’ is straightforward enough,” Sakura commented.

“Yes, one of the many epitaphs of Japan,” Tomoyo agreed. “And, from the point of view of someone in England, Japan would be almost directly opposite, on the other side of the world.

“If that’s the case, then the five from Japan would be Tomoyo, Sakura, Syaoran, Kero, and Yue,” Eriol said, counting off the names on his fingers. “Since I am intimately involved in this affair, the city must refer to London, which would make the three Spinel Sun, Ruby Moon, and myself.”

Tomoyo snapped her fingers. “Then the wolf and the blossoming fruit tree must be Syaoran and Sakura. It’s a close translation of their names.”

“The Guardians are the four of us, of course,” Kero stated. “That part’s easy.”

“Trickster,” Syaoran muttered dryly, giving Eriol a sidelong glance. “That’s one of the nicer names one would call you.”

“Then Kaho must be my ‘bride’,” the half reincarnation smirked.

“But what separation did she discover?” Yue pointed out reasonably.

“It was Sakura who found the first signs of wizards and witches,” Spinel added.

“There was a different separation, more to do with the reasons we did not know of them and that weakens magical attacks drastically,” Syaoran explained. “Mizuki-sensei found the mutation in the DNA.”

“Then that leaves me as the Halfling?” Tomoyo wondered. “But what is that? Or how is that?”

Sakura frowned. “I can’t think of anything…” She glanced at her friends, who looked just as puzzled.

“It’s Eriol’s magic, of course,” Nakuru stated matter-of-factly. “You can use it, but you’re a non-magical person. Not this or that, but half and half.”

Everyone stared at the air-head.

“Yes,” Eriol said slowly, equal parts astonished and impressed. “That makes perfect sense.”

“I never thought I’d hear anyone say that to her. Ever,” muttered Kero under his breath.

Yue studied the prophecy for a moment, head tilted to the side. “Overall, the first part seems to mean that now that we have appeared, the war is almost over.”

“That we know,” Syaoran said with a nod. “Sakura has been feeling the end looming closer and I have uncovered plans for a major assault two nights from now.”

“Who’s the boy and the man, though?” interrupted Kero. “We’ve already identified all of us.”

“Wizards, then?” Tomoyo suggested.
“The Headmaster seemed to recognize the phrase,” Sakura informed them and described the scene in his office. “I think it was a bowl of memories,” she concluded.

Eriol’s eyes glinted with interest. “Why don’t you experiment?” he suggested.

Sakura stared at him, horrified. “That’s like putting a loaded gun to your head!” she exclaimed. “I think not.”

“The last part is very vague,” Spinel said, returning his attention to the prophecy. “There will be some sort of choice…”

“A choice to change the world,” murmured Yue. “But no idea of what that choice is.”

Eriol sighed. “I guess that’s as far as we’ll get with this. Just be careful to remember that this is not set in stone.”

“One more thing,” Sakura added. “The Queen reminds us that the history of the islands is protecting the forces who oppose Voldemort. When that happens, we cannot interfere.”

“They assume we’ll recognize it,” Eriol pointed out.

“It must be a rather rare occurrence,” Syaoran replied wryly.

“Anyway, be sure to get plenty of rest. I think we’ll need all of our strength to get done what needs to be done,” Eriol ordered. “Tomoyo, I think training will be quite a bit more intense for the next day. We should all use the last day to make sure our magic is fully recovered.”

The group was silent for quite a while after. Kero eventually made his way to the kitchen to find food, and broke them out of their stupor.

“No thank you,” Sakura declined in response to the offer of food. “I’ve already eaten.” She turned to Syaoran and hugged him tightly. His arms circled her waist and held her close.

“Sleep here tonight, Syaoran. Please. You’re exhausted, and there’s not much more that can be accomplished now,” she murmured.

He sighed. “All right. I’ve already set up spells for food to spoil, noise to disrupt their sleep no matter what spell is used, and clothing to be wrecked or missing. They don’t need to be renewed until tomorrow night. And the night after, well…” he trailed off.

“Sleep well,” Sakura said, with a quick kiss. “I’m going back to Hogwarts.”

“Be careful,” he said seriously.

“I will,” she reassured him, before saying good bye to her friends, gathering up Spinel, and teleporting back to her room at the school.

Bran traveled slowly, relishing in the sounds and smells of this ancient and magical forest. He traveled freely and unhurried. Ancient laws dictated the safety of roads for bards, originating in the distant past when bards were the main source of entertainment and news of the outside world, as well as the carrier of personal messages.

Bards were one of the few magical races known by all others, as well as intelligent creatures. He had already spent quite a while talking to the herd of centaurs who frequented this part of the
forest, and he could feel the gaze of several different creatures that had come to see who he was.

He took his time. There was really no hurry.

Eventually, though, he could sense the creatures dispersing, abandoning this area of forest, and he soon heard the movement of people up ahead. The scent of blood reached his nose, and the desperate cries of a helpless creature.

Bran’s pulse quickened, and he extended his senses, reaching out with tendrils of magic to warn him of obstacles as he began to run. The sack containing his harp thumped almost painfully against his back, but it was well protected. In mere moments he stumbled upon the dead body of an adult male unicorn. Several masked men and women in black robes were converging upon a small golden foal who gave out helpless little cries as it struggled to get away on a broken leg. He heard the rustle of robes and the stumbling gait of the foal, felt the almost miniscule changes in the air when spells were let loose, but most useful of all, his magic flowed around the area, bringing the picture into focus in his mind. He counted six, seven, eight Death Eaters. Too many for him, he knew, but there was no one else.

His harp found its way into his hands in the blink of an eye; the sack fell to the ground. I won’t be needing that anymore, he thought with a mirthless smile.

The wizards and witches had not even realized he stood there, and so were noticeably startled when he began the song of protection, drawing the magic from the strings of his instrument, and weaving them into a dome that surrounded the foal. No wizard or witch, no matter how powerful, would be able to bring down Bran’s protection. But then, Bran depended on another to release the baby unicorn. The Card Mistress would know to come, would get the message when the battle ended.

“What do you think you are doing, fool?” one of the wizards spoke menacingly.

“Do you know what happens when you kill a unicorn? Not the hearsay or the textbook explanation, but the true curse that will attach itself to your souls for the rest of your life?” Bran said darkly. “You have no idea of what you have done, and no respect for anything but your evil.”

“You will die,” a witch promised, raising her wand. “And then we shall have that foal.”

“You seem so certain. I should warn you that I am a true bard. My protection extends throughout all magical races. Should you breach the ancient law, you shall be struck down,” he warned. But he knew they wouldn’t listen.

“Fairytales,” spat the one who had first spoken.

Bran saw him begin to move his wand, and the bard’s expression became grim. “Very well,” he murmured, and ran his hand sharply along the strings. The ground heaved and bucked away from him, and several Death Eaters shouted in surprise as they were tossed about.

Bran didn’t like to kill, but he’d be damned if he went down without a fight.

Spinel Sun returned to the library where he felt most comfortable sleeping, and Sakura waved good-bye before beginning to slip off her dress to put on her pajamas. She had only begun to lift the hem when the screaming began. It echoed in her head and resounded in her chest. The surprise and pain made her fall to her knees, her hands pressed against her ears. It did no good, for the sound was more inside her head than out. Some great travesty had occurred, some sort of blasphemy of the highest order, and the forest screamed in rage and sorrow.
Sakura stumbled to her feet and out the door, heedless of whether there were others around or not. She was panicking. Something had happened, and she felt that it involved Bran.

She nearly tumbled down the stairs, the sheer rage and anguish almost blinding her with its potency. At the last minute she grasped the railing and froze for a moment, panting, as she tried to push away the screaming until it was more tolerable. When she had finally succeeded, she nearly flew to the Entrance Hall and out the door, panic lending her great speed and magic boosting her even more as she raced through the forest.

Harry had been unable to sleep, and so he was the only one in his dorm to hear a fain whine in the distance, coming from the Forbidden Forest. His heart raced for no apparent reason, and when he glanced at his dorm mates, he saw that they were turning uneasily in their sleep.

“What is that?” he whispered, settling himself in the window and gazing out across the grounds.

Albus Dumbledore awoke suddenly, and he had no idea why.

He lay in his bed quietly, listening for anything out of place. After a moment he heard it. The faint screaming coming from the Forbidden Forest seemed to echo in his mind, and resonate faintly in his chest. With the energy of one a fraction of his age, he leaped out of bed, threw on a dressing robe, and quickly raced out of his bedroom and through his office.

The sight of Fawkes, singing a dirge and crying crystal tears gave him pause, and then spurred him on even faster. At the top of the stairs he met Minerva, who was looking at him wide-eyed.

“Why is it screaming?” she asked as she trailed him to the ground floor.

“I don’t know,” he replied as Severus came striding into view, moving quickly as his robes billowed about him.

“Headmaster,” the Potions Master began, to be cut off by the shake of a head.

“I don’t know what is happening, but I believe we should investigate quickly,” said Albus. “Ah, Sir Nicholas,” he called to the ghost, who was looking rather nervous. “Would you be so kind as to inform the first professor who wakes that they are in charge until the three of us return?”

“Of course, Headmaster,” the ghost replied with a bow and floated away.

At that moment, a blur of red and gold passed through them without seeming to notice and raced out the open door and across the grounds.

“Not a student,” murmured Albus, and the three professors exchanged glances.

“We should hurry,” observed Severus.

Without further ado, they summoned brooms, and flew as quickly as possible to where the wailing was loudest.

Sakura dodged branches, leaped over roots and stones without thought as she sprinted to the source of the disturbance. Her magic kept her going at an almost inhuman speed without
becoming overly winded. Her clothes, unsurprisingly, resisted dirt and tears, a testament to the spells that had been woven into the fabric.

She stumbled onto a gruesome scene, and skidded to a halt, quickly averting her gaze from where two large panther-like creatures were tearing into two bodies. Bran was off to her right, sprawled on the ground, dead, though thankfully with few marks on him. His harp was held to his chest. Every string had snapped, and the frame was broken in two. A quick glance told her that several other bodies were strewn along the forest floor, these Death Eaters dead by magical means.

Sakura fought desperately against dizziness and nausea. I'll throw up later, she half promised, half pleaded with herself, and her nausea subsided at that.

“He knew,” she murmured, remembering his earlier words. “He knew that he would die today.”

Only then did she notice that the area was surrounded by all sorts of creatures of the forest. Aside from the panthers, she saw a centaur, a unicorn, dryads, pixies, a pooka, a kelpie, and many other creatures. She shivered when she spotted a giant spider.

“What?” she murmured confused.

The forest spirit that had led her to Death Eater activity not so long ago approached her. “We have come to pay our respects to one of the last true bards, and the first to have been murdered so in many centuries. All but the Darkest of creatures have come. The nundu had the honor of killing those Death Eaters who would have escaped.” She nodded at the panther-like creatures, and Sakura peeked quickly at the magnificent, blood-spattered cats.

“I see,” Sakura whispered.

It was the glimmer of light that drew the professors to the ground. Upon landing, they were somewhat astonished to see a unicorn foal trapped inside a dome of magic. A female unicorn that was assumed to be the mother had curled up against the dome, tapping at it with her horn as if hoping to release her offspring. A male unicorn, bloodied and still, lay a few yards away.

Albus carefully approached the dorm and gingerly laid his hand on the dome. He snatched his hand back, the powerful magic giving him an almost painful shock.

“It’s a very strong spell,” Albus informed his companions. “I’m of a mind to say that this is bardic magic.” He drew his wand, murmuring every spell of release he knew, but the dome didn’t even flicker.

“Albus,” Severus interrupted, carefully picking his way across the torn ground. “Something’s happening over here.”

The Headmaster exchanged looks with his Deputy and followed Severus around a large boulder and squeezed between several bushes.

Minerva flinched and gasped when what they were seeing registered. The bodies were one thing, but to be surrounded by the many creatures of the Forbidden Forest was terribly dangerous. She saw that Severus already had his wand out, and was eyeing the scene suspiciously, eyes darting from creature to creature.

“What happened?” murmured Albus quietly.

Minerva, taking advantage of the superior eyesight of her Animagus form, quickly surveyed the
area. “The bodies are Death Eaters,” she said quietly, her eyes immediately drawn to the only human figure still standing upright. The features were obscured by the darkness, but Minerva was willing to bet that it was Sakura, if that was indeed who their intruder was.

“Bran, the bard,” she breathed, finally focusing on the body at the girl’s feet, a shaft of moonlight illuminating his features.

“He took quite a few down with him,” Severus commented, impressed.

“And the nundu killed the rest,” added Albus with a nod at the creatures, still hovering over their prey.

Sakura had tensed when the professors had first found their way onto the scene. She was thankful that it was night, and the trees blocked the moonlight. It was very improbable that they would be able to identify her.

When she spoke she disguised her voice by speaking a few octaves higher than normal.

“His soul has traveled on,” Sakura announced to the gathering. “In fire we shall purify his mortal body.”

To acknowledge the importance of the occasion, she spoke the full incantation to release her staff. Her key elongated, and she spun it expertly as it grew into a staff topped by a winged star.

She drew a card from her pocket and flipped it into the air.

“Firey.”

A slender strand of flame emerged from the card, thickening as it encircled the Card Mistress at a safe distance, and then twined around the body of the bard. Taking on the shape of a girl, the flames gently and respectfully passed her hands over his upper body, and finally his face. There was a brilliant flash of light, blinding all who witnessed the event, and when Sakura blinked the spots from her eyes, all that was left of the bard was a scattering of ash.

“May the gods watch over you,” she whispered solemnly as a unicorn stepped forward to greet her.

She followed the unicorn through the trees as the other creatures began to disperse. The three professors turned to follow her, but were stopped by a centaur who introduced himself as Romano.

“I thought to inform you, Headmaster, that should any Death Eaters attempt to make their way through the forest, you will have the aid of every creature that was here. In breaking the ancient laws regarding bards, the Death Eaters have earned the enmity of most of the forest,” Romano said seriously.

Severus looked thoughtful, Minerva relieved, and Albus thankful. They had been worried not only about their numbers, but also about how to create an alliance with those that lived in the forest, as the merfolk and the Giant Squid were the only creatures tied to the castle. The addition of the forest’s inhabitants would increase their strength tremendously. It would give them a very good chance at winning.

“You have our thanks,” said Albus with a respectful bow. “You should know that Voldemort intends to attack Hogwarts in two nights time.”
Romano nodded. “I shall be sure to spread the word. Good night.”

He wheeled around and plunged into the trees.

“What should we do with the bodies?” Minerva asked softly, placing a hand on Albus’ arm.

“Leave them,” suggested Severus. “The predators and scavengers will no doubt be glad of the feast, and we do not have the time to arrange for burial.”

Minerva looked troubled, as did Albus, but they both reluctantly agreed.

“Come,” said the elderly wizard, placing a hand on her lower back and gently propelling her forward. “We should return to the castle. There’s nothing more to do here.”

They made their way past the spot where the shield had trapped the young unicorn. It surprised none of them that neither the child, nor its parents, was anywhere to be seen.

“Thank you,” Sakura murmured to Cloudwalker, the unicorn who had deigned to give her a ride back to the castle. The ride had passed in a blur, and had taken even less time than her magically enhanced sprint.

He bumped her shoulder good-naturedly with his nose, and then trotted back into the forest.

As Sakura stumbled the rest of the way to the doors, she noticed that her hands were shaking. Shock, she thought distantly as she held up her hands for inspection. Bloodied bodies, torn to ribbons, hovered at the edges of her mind’s eye, and she felt her nausea return.

“No,” she gasped, futilely trying to shove the image away, hurrying forward clumsily as if she could outrun it. Her room was too far away, and so she headed for the Infirmary. Gods knew she felt ill enough.

The door opened silently, but the nurse must have had a spell on it, for Madame Pomfrey soon made her way to the entrance, looking tired and harried.

“What on earth?” she muttered in alarm when she took in Sakura’s dirtied and exhausted form as the girl collapsed to her knees. Immediately recognizing signs of nausea, she summoned a basin just in time. The medi-witch murmured nonsensical, soothing words to the girl as she held back her hair and rubbed circles on her back. Sakura sobbed, taking in great gulps of air when she could, her whole body trembling.

“Come,” said Madame Pomfrey when Sakura was calm and no longer heaving. “Let’s get you into bed.” She led the young girl to an empty cot, and then left as Sakura climbed in, returning with a potion.

“Dreamless Sleep,” she explained when Sakura looked at her questioningly. “You won’t have any nightmares tonight.”

“Thank you,” said Sakura in a hoarse voice and she downed the contents as Madame Pomfrey drew the curtains around the bed to give her some privacy. Sakura immediately fell asleep.

Moments later Spinel Sun crept out from his hiding place under a bed, and flew over to the Card Mistress, curling into a ball under her chin. When the screaming had begun, he had quickly deduced what must have happened, and had suspected that Sakura would not be in a very good shape when she returned. He had waited for her at the doors and followed her to the Infirmary,
keeping out of sight of any wizards and witches. Sakura herself was in no shape to notice him. He may not have been Kerberos, but he offered what comfort he could.

As if she sensed his presence, even in sleep, Sakura’s expression eased from worried and troubled to content.

It was past noon when Sakura woke, well rested and surprised to see Spinel Sun lying on her pillow. She sat up slowly, wincing at the brightness of the white walls. “What happened?” she murmured in confusion.

Then the events of the night before rushed back into her memory and she fell back down onto the bed with a moan. The images were blurred, made softer by time, but still prominent. Sakura knew, knew without a doubt that she would never be able to kill, not on purpose. Not by magical means, even if that were possible, and certainly not by physical means.

So then. She would just have to be creative about knocking out and trapping the enemy. There was a day and a half more to plan before the battle.

“Are you feeling better, Sakura-san?” a quiet voice broke into her thoughts.

“Oh, Spinel-san. I am feeling better than I was last night, thank you.” A thought occurred to Sakura and she smile shyly at the Guardian. “Did you come find me to keep me company and make sure I was all right?”

The little winged cat coughed embarrassedly and blushed as he looked away.

“Thank you very much. I really appreciate it,” she said, hugging him despite his protests.

“Well,” he said. “If that’s all, I believe I shall return to the library. The more I learn, the better I will be able to battle these witches and wizards.”

Sakura nodded. “See you later.”

She waited a while longer to recover herself, and then climbed out of bed, standing on shaky legs. Her strength returned fairly quickly as she slipped out of the Infirmary and headed to the kitchens to feed her empty stomach. Then she headed to the bathrooms to get a much needed bath.

It was lucky, she thought sometime later as she sat on the ledge of one of the large windows, that the moon would be nearly full when the Dark Lord attacked. It would give Ruby Moon and Yue a bit of a boost since their power was tied to the moon.

Which reminded her of Professor Lupin. Tonight would be a good night to transform his curse. While he should be quite used to the body of a wolf, it would give him time to become accustomed to transforming at will without pain.

The ritual would take a bit out of her, but she could sleep all day tomorrow and be awake and at full power when they were attacked. Tomoyo, Eriol, and Syaoran would be coming tomorrow so to await the time and become somewhat familiar with the castle and its grounds. The Guardians would be welcomed by the Forbidden Forest, and would set up the alarm when the Death Eaters first appeared.

Sakura curled her hands into fists. There was so much, really, that could go wrong. This was nothing like capturing or changing Cards. It was so much more deadly, and Sakura was so much more frightened. She was both consoled and ashamed at the thought that she would be somewhat
separated from the fighting and well-protected. Because no matter how much she wanted to help, she had a duty to her own race of magical beings. The Card Mistress could not put herself in needless danger. Not now that a Card Mistress had finally been found after so many centuries.

But still, there would be danger aplenty. War is, after all, hazardous to one’s health.

It was a very good thing, she decided, that Touya didn’t know what she had been up to. Otherwise she would be in very, very big trouble.

Remus Lupin sighed and leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. Candlelight flickered, casting shadows across his face even as it illuminated the stack of parchment on his desk. The largest assault that had been seen in this war was planned for tomorrow night, the castle was filling up with members of the Order and allies, secretly, of course, preparations and defenses were being hastily put together, and here he was grading 3rd year quizzes as if nothing was happening. Life was simply beyond description sometimes.

He eyed the steaming goblet that contained his potion. Severus had brought it by earlier with his usual lack of good cheer.

He sighed again and reached for the goblet. There was nothing for it. He might as well get it over with.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” said a young, feminine voice.

Remus started, and nearly knocked the potion over.

“It probably wouldn’t react well with the ritual,” she continued with a grin.

I must be more tired than I thought, Remus commented in his head. Especially this close to the full moon, he should have sensed her without problems.

He examined her carefully as she sat on one of the student desks, kicking her heels. Her head was tilted to one side as she studied him thoughtfully. Remus wondered if she was one of their allies. She certainly wasn’t one of the students at any rate, although she looked young enough to be.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” he said at last. There was a pause and then, “Do I know you?”

The girl looked startled, and then a little chagrined. “Yes. But you’ve forgotten.”

“I apologize,” Remus began, embarrassed, but she waved him off.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said, and then made a strange motion with her hand before snapping her fingers.

The werewolf winced at the suddenness of the memory, and then sat bolt upright. “You! Sakura…”

“I’ve come to do what I promised,” Sakura said, a little apologetically. “I didn’t want to do it too early. And this way you have a day to get used to transforming voluntarily.”

Remus remained silent for a moment, processing everything, and then his eyes widened. “You know about the attack?”

“Well, of course,” she said, eyes sparkling with amusement. “How do you think your spy found
out?”

Remus shook his head in disbelief, speechless. He stood and moved around to the front of his desk, leaning against it, arms crossed, as he regarded Sakura with narrowed eyes. “Why are you doing this? You help us, but you hide from us and do what you can to prevent knowledge of your presence.”

Sakura looked away, gathering her thoughts before she spoke. “It was a friend’s idea, really. He figured it would be less hassle this way. We could observe and help when needed without going through all of the…‘red tape.’ But there was more to it than that,” she added quickly, forestalling the wizard’s outraged comment. “We had never heard of wizards or witches before, and we wanted to know why. We weren’t sure what our reception would be.” She grinned wryly and gave him a sidelong look. “From what you’ve told me, it’s likely a good idea we didn’t make ourselves known.”

Remus winced.

“Also, we’re doing this on our own. As it stands, we can’t act officially, since we’re the only ones aware of the situation.”

The wizard nodded. “I can’t imagine that your government would give that kind of power to ones who have recently reached adulthood.” He sighed, thinking of England’s Ministry and added, “Not that the older and more experienced are all that much better. You seem very mature and powerful. Are you sure you won’t get in trouble for this?”

Sakura smiled secretively. He had no idea of their power. She was pretty much the most powerful sorcerer, both magically and politically. The Elders handled most matters, but once she was older, she would be given the more difficult cases. Syaoran was the head of the Li clan, the most powerful family of sorcerers. Eriol was half the reincarnation of one of the most powerful sorcerers in any time. And Tomoyo was the daughter of the head of one of the largest companies in the world.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” she reassured him. “But about this ritual…”

His expression became at once more guarded and more hopeful. “Can you really…” his voice broke and he cleared his throat. “Can you really do what you say?” Remus had been more or less content with his life, had come to accept that he would be a lycanthrope for life. Now his hopes had risen dangerously, despite himself, and if this girl, this sorceress, couldn’t do what she claimed, he would be crushed.

Sakura met his gaze and held it. “I can do this,” she said deliberately.

Remus closed his eyes and turned away. “Right then,” he said at last. When do we do this?”

“Now,” Sakura said, sliding off the desk.

“Now?” he asked, startled.

“Now,” she repeated, and headed for the door. “Well?” she asked, turning to look back at him from her place in the doorway. She smiled gently. “Are you coming?”

Remus felt an answering smile on his lips. “Yes,” he said, and followed her through the deserted hallways.

“We’re going into the Forbidden Forest,” Sakura told him before he could ask as they slipped outside. “There’s a clearing near the lake that I’ve prepared.”
“Do I need to do anything?” he asked.

“Just sit where I tell you and don’t move. But I’ll need your wand and any magical objects you might carry. The ritual is very delicate, and anything magical could throw it off.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way. Remus stopped short when he saw Sakura’s preparations. There was a large main circle drawn in the dirt with an opening on one side. Five stones were placed evenly around the circle, with herbs spaced in between them. Four smaller circles were connected to the main circle, each containing a bowl that held dirt, water, a candle, or a feather.

Remus recoiled and spun to face Sakura. “Are you trying to kill yourself?” he asked in disbelief. “This goes beyond the Great Rituals. Even with your power, how could you expect to live through this?”

“What?” Sakura asked confused, and glanced at the circle. “It’s complex, to be sure, but I’ll only be rather tired, not dead.”

He eyed her doubtfully.

“Oh!” Sakura exclaimed, snapping her fingers. “That’s right. Wizards can’t do rituals, can they? You don’t need to worry. For sorcery, rituals guide the magic towards the desired result, and in some cases amplify the power. This way there is no wasted energy as can happen otherwise.”

“If you say so,” he said doubtfully.

“I do. Don’t worry. Now, sit in the main circle, but make sure to step through the opening,” she said. “But first, I’ll need any magical objects.”

Remus hesitated, but handed over his wand. “That’s it,” he said as he stepped into the circle. Sakura closed it behind him.

“Good,” she said, pocketing the wand. “Now, don’t move until I tell you it’s all right, no matter what happens.”

“Wait, what will happen?” he asked worriedly, but she had already begun chanting, and he knew better than to interrupt. Instead he listened, wondering what language Sakura used. He began to fall into a trance, and the more he listened, the deeper he fell.

“…mus? Professor Lupin?”

“Pardon?” Remus blinked. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“We’re done,” Sakura said with a smile. “Just step through the break I made in the circle.”

“Already?” he asked, stretching.

“It’s been half an hour,” Sakura pointed out.

“It has?” he asked, surprised.

“You were in a trance,” she informed him. “Why don’t you test your transformation while I clean this up?”

Remus bit his lip, apprehensive. If it didn’t work…
“Just trust yourself, concentrate, and you’ll be fine,” she said with a soft smile. “Go on.”

The former werewolf took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the wolf. He flinched when he first felt the transformation take place before realizing that there was no pain. No pain! No agony, no torture. The transformation was smooth, seamless, and when he opened his eyes he saw through the eyes of a wolf.

Sakura laughed as he yipped with joy and romped around as if he were a puppy.

Several minutes later the two were walking back to the castle. Remus stood taller, giving off a much happier air and looked more his age rather than old beyond his years. Sakura was happy that she could give that to him, and she understood why sorcerers could spend their lives searching the world for werewolves in order to transform the curse.

“It took quite a while to create this ritual,” Sakura commented. “It was a sorceress who discovered the plant that was the key to its success.” She grinned impishly at Remus who raised an eyebrow.

“And what kind of plant might that be?” he asked at last.

“The kind that is used to regulate the menstrual cycle,” Sakura replied, and the two of them laughed.

Sakura turned to Remus when they reached the doors. “I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell anyone about me. At least not yet. Wait until after the battle?”

He was silent for a while, thinking this over. Sakura waited anxiously. She couldn’t seal away the memory this time, not now that he was no longer a werewolf. He would definitely need that knowledge.

“All right,” he said at last. “You don’t seem to be a threat, and it’s the least I could do to repay you for giving me a life back.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. “By the way, how is Hermione?”

She smirked as Remus blushed, stammered, and then walked away quickly. Only when he was gone did she allow herself to sag, more tired than she thought she’d be after casting the spell. She burrowed deeper into her school robe and walked quickly back to her room, collapsing on her bed immediately.

She slept the rest of the night and the next day until Syaoran woke her up at noon.

“Care to pull me through?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

“Of course,” she murmured sleepily. Reaching through the portal, she grasped his wrists and pulled him through. They had hit upon this idea when trying to figure out how to get through the castle’s wards. Next Tomoyo appeared, and finally Eriol.

“What happened to Yue, Kero, and Nakuru?” Sakura asked, fighting back a yawn.

“They decided to take the train. They’ll be ready by tonight,” Eriol answered, glancing around the room.

“Why don’t you go back to sleep, Sakura,” Tomoyo said worriedly. “We can explore on our own.”

“If you’re sure,” Sakura said uncertainly.
“Yes, we are,” said Syaoran. “You need your rest. It starts tonight.”

“If you want company, I’m sure Syaoran wouldn’t mind at all,” Tomoyo added brightly.

“Yes,” agreed Eriol in the same tone of voice. “I’m sure he would looooooove to make sure Sakura is well-guarded in case any young, teenage wizard happens upon her while she is asleep and unsuspecting.”

“Ho ho ho,” Tomoyo laughed as Syaoran’s face began to resemble that of a tomato.

“Nani?” Sakura asked, confused. “But doesn’t he need to survey the grounds too?”

Syaoran was actually looking quite torn between doing what needed to be done, and staying with Sakura on the off-chance that a wizard actually did find her room despite the fact that Sakura had been the only one to even discover it in months. “Let’s just go,” he growled finally, glaring daggers at his two companions.

“Just a minute,” Sakura called out. “I have a map.” She dug the parchment out of her backpack and tapped it with her wand. “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

“Thank you,” said Eriol with an amused smile at the password. “This is definitely useful.”

“Spinel Sun is in the library,” Sakura mumbled as she fell back asleep.
Sakura was gently shaken awake by Syaoran as the sky grew dark.

“Wake up,” the Chinese sorcerer murmured, and she sat up groggily, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Climbing to her feet, she stretched, feeling more awake and well-rested than she had all
week. A quick check of her power levels showed that she was finally back to full strength.

“Sakura,” Syaoran said sternly, and the young sorceress looked up from where she had been straightening her clothes. Created by Tomoyo, the pants and long-sleeved shirt were loose and flowing, made of a dark material good for defense in magical battles. Syaoran and Eriol wore their traditional robes, more worn, but just as imbued with innate defensive magics.

“Nani?” she asked, fixing her attention on him with quiet curiosity.

“You’ve been burning out all week, Sakura. You know better than that. It’s not healthy, and I bet you’ve passed out more than once in a very short time, haven’t you?”

Sakura’s bright green eyes darkened. With a personality as open and naïve as hers was, it was difficult to hide the truth.

Syaoran sighed and embraced her tightly in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. “We will talk afterward,” he said, and kissed her gently.

She nodded wordlessly. “I’m going to go find Eriol.”

Syaoran frowned, but forbore to ask questions upon seeing Sakura’s pleading expression. “I’ll be on the wall,” he said instead, and they parted ways, she brushing a hand against his arm in passing.

Sakura closed her eyes and concentrated on Eriol’s aura. To her, his familiar blue magic shone like a beacon, and she followed it to the floor above.

“Good evening, Sakura-chan,” he murmured in his low, cultured voice.

“Konbanwa, Eriol-kun,” she replied in kind.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

She hesitated, and then sighed. “I can’t kill, Eriol. I can’t just watch as others are murdered in front of me. I’ll freeze, or be sick, or something, and I can’t defend myself if I’m distracted. Isn’t there a spell that could repress any reactions I might have?”

“There is one thing,” he said at last. “For as long as you sustain it, it will give you a certain… distance from what is going on. It will delay your natural reactions until it is safe, but you must deal with them eventually.”

“Good,” she said in relief. “Let’s do it.”

“I’ll provide the structure,” Eriol said as he placed one finger to her forehead. “You’ll need to feed the spell power to activate it.”

At his words, something tickled at the edge of her mind, as though she had forgotten something. Sakura mistakenly attributed it to Eriol’s spell and thought little more of it.

“Shall we go meet Syaoran?” the half reincarnation asked, his slight smile firmly in place to hide any hint of nerves.

“All right,” Sakura agreed, and the two swept up the stairs to join the third member in their little group. “Where’s Tomoyo?” Sakura asked worriedly. Her hands trembled, and she clenched them into fists.
The two boys traded glances. “Tomoyo will stay in the school, wherever the children are gathered. She’ll be our last line of defense. The Guardians will stay fairly close to the castle, and the three of us will roam wherever we’re needed,” Eriol explained.

Sakura nodded, and they stared over the moonlit grounds of a fairytale castle that would soon become a battleground.

“Don’t die,” Syaoran said quietly, almost helplessly.

“I won’t,” Sakura replied in equally soft tones. “You know that.”

Intellectually, he knew that she would live for a long, long time. But the future was not fixed. And the fear would always remain.

In the silence she mentally chanted her invincibility spell, over and over like a mantra. Zettai daijoubu da yo. Zettai daijoubu da yo.

Spinel Sun’s wildcat scream, and Kero’s roar echoed throughout the night. Sakura and Eriol summoned their staves, and Syaoran called forth his sword. The Death Eaters had entered the Forbidden Forest.

A fluttering and a harsh cawing momentarily distracted them, and Eriol narrowed his eyes as he counted the numbers of crows under his breath. “Nine.”

“What does that mean?” Sakura asked quietly.

The half-reincarnation replied with a rhyme, chanting in an almost sing-song tone.

“One for sorrow
Two for mirth
Three for a wedding
Four for a birth
Five for silver
Six for gold
Seven for a secret never to be told
Eight for heaven
Nine for hell
And ten for the devil’s own sel’.”

Hold on to me love
You know I can’t stay long
All I wanted to say was I love you and I’m not afraid…

Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were not stupid. Even spending so much of their free time sitting by Draco’s side and wishing for his recovery, they had noticed an unusual activity inside Hogwarts. With the Marauder’s Map in their possession, it was rather difficult to hide a sudden, large influx of wizards and witches. With seven years of experience gathering and piecing together information, it took little effort to realize that preparations for quite a large battle were underway.

They prepared themselves quietly, looking up as many useful spells as possible in the library. When they visited their blond Slytherin friend, they begged him to wake up. They couldn’t bear to think of him helpless and at the mercy of Death Eaters.

In prior skirmishes and drills, the upper years had remained on or behind the wall that surrounded Hogwarts as they defended the castle from the forces of the Dark Lord. The four Gryffindors had
other plans. With such a large-scale attack, Voldemort was likely to show up. They weren’t ready, hadn’t even graduated, but they couldn’t afford to put off any confrontation while the Light side was failing. It would take years to even come close to Voldemort’s experience. Years they didn’t have.

It was stupid and reckless, and could hardly even be called a plan. It was, as Draco would say, typically Gryffindor.

And so, when they heard something that sounded like a jungle cat, and another that sounded like a lion, they were surprised, but hardly confused. With the judicious use of shortcuts, they had made it outside before the alarm had rung. The four lingered, hidden under their two Invisibility Cloaks until the first wave of fighters had amassed on the field and begun marching into the Forbidden Forest. They skirted the edges, keeping out of the range as they followed.

Suddenly Ron whimpered. Harry couldn’t blame him, as he was having flashbacks of his second year adventure following Hagrid’s advice.


The four of them winced and Ron’s face had taken on a greenish hue under the cloak when one of the giant spiders sank its fangs into a Death Eater.

“At least they’re on…our side?” Hermione whispered uncertainly.

…Can you hear me
Can you feel me in your arms…

Sakura had taken to the skies on her staff almost immediately, earning herself a bird’s eye view of the struggle. Her Sight was partially unblocked in order to see and sense wizardry without becoming blinded, the only protection she allowed herself in the air.

Spells flashed in the dark of night, all colors of the rainbow. It would have been beautiful had it not been so deadly. Her ears picked out the screams of the injured and dying, and she swallowed hard.

Syaoran and Eriol had disappeared into the night, and she hadn’t seen any of the Guardians so far. She was alone.

Sakura surveyed the ground a second time, searching for the area where most of the fighting was taking place. Strangely enough, the fighting appeared to be concentrated in the center of the forest, bathed in the eerie, flickering glow of a roaring fire. Were they trying to burn the forest down?

The sorceress narrowed her eyes in contemplation. Actually, there seemed to be something familiar about that area….

An incoming curse broke her concentration, and she rolled on her staff so that the spell shot high before she dove into the cover of the trees and headed toward the center. Despite her speed and how nearly she grazed the trees, she didn’t dare slow down. So quickly was she going that she nearly missed the clearing where a group was in dire need of help. One man was bleeding, and unconscious. A witch and wizard were engaged with a snarling, fearsome man while another witch was on the ground, writhing and screaming, under the power of a laughing Death Eater.

Sakura executed a sharp turn so that she was nearly parallel to the ground, her hands nearly slipping from her staff with the force of it. She alighted on the ground, nearly stumbling before catching her balance, and immediately recalled Fly.
“Hey, what…” the laughing wizard began, surprised.

Sakura paid him no attention and drew a card, flinging it into the air. “Wood!” she shouted and struck it with her staff. The figure of a woman emerged, a wood sprite with leaves in her hair. She made a sharp gesture, and the thick roots of the ancient trees burst from the ground in a fury, spraying dirt into the air. Immediately, they wrapped around those who had become evil and corrupt, nearly crushing them in their wooden embrace.

A moan escaped the tortured witch as she collapsed, and her companions rushed to her side.

“Thank you,” the wizard said sincerely. “Thank you.”

Sakura smiled half-heartedly and once more summoned Fly to her staff. There was barely enough room in the glade to become airborne. Her sense of direction had escaped her, so she picked a random direction and offered her assistance where it was needed. It was the best she could do for the moment, and she was determined to help as much as she could.

…Holding my last breath
Save inside myself
Are all my thoughts of you
Sweet raptured light it ends here tonight…

Eriol watched as Sakura flew off into the night and Syaoran leaped from tree branch to tree branch. He himself kept to the ground, his walk confident and unhurried. His expression was cold, his eyes dark and determined as he stalked through the battlefield, a force of fear and sometimes death. He caught a glimpse of Spinel at one point, muzzle and paws stained dark with blood.

His thoughts returned to the brilliant white of Sakura’s wings, and he frowned. Perhaps Clow should have created Fly in a darker color, one that would blend into the night sky. If anyone happened to look up, Sakura would definitely draw their attention. Of course, a girl on a pink staff would likely be somewhat conspicuous anyway….

“Nooo!!!” An anguished scream drew his attention and he arrived in time to witness a woman fling herself down by the battered body of a dead man. “Ari, please don’t be dead.” Tears poured down her face. “Please. Please”

She yelped as she was hauled back by her collar.

“I would have spared him, you know,” the Death Eater said conversationally. “He didn’t have to throw himself in my way. You were the one I really wanted dead, Kat. Filthy traitor.”

“Murderer,” she whispered brokenly, the light gone from her eyes.

“Your fault as much as it was mine,” he stated.

She flinched, as though his words were a physical blow.

“Pathetic,” the Death Eater said and closed his hand around her throat. “I don’t even need to use magic to kill you.”

He staggered and dropped her, gasping in surprise as he stared at the large shard of ice that protruded through his chest. In a moment he lay dead on the ground.

“Pathetic,” said a different voice.

Kat turned her head slowly, as though it were an effort to even move.
“What will you do?” the voice said again, and Eriol stepped in front of her.

“We were just married,” she said hollowly. She fingered her wand, the tip pointed at herself. “He was all I had left.”

“So you’ll kill yourself then. Throw both your lives away.” Eriol could see the life just beginning in her womb. He could tell her. Force her to choose life. But that choice couldn’t be forced, or she might resent her child. If in the end she decided on death over life, he wouldn’t stop her. But Eriol could sure as hell be convincing. He had been and still was a master manipulator.

“I’ll be with him,” she protested weakly.

“You will waste his sacrifice, and throw it back in his face. He would be ashamed. You should be.”

She recoiled as though she had been slapped, but Eriol’s expression remained cold as ice.

“You don’t understand,” she protested.

“Are you truly such a spineless coward?” the sorcerer asked. He waited but she didn’t reply. “Pathetic,” he repeated.

Something in her seemed to rekindle, and she raised her head to glare at him, nearly growling at the insult. “I’m not!” she bellowed.

Eriol smirked at her, as annoyingly as possible. “Prove it.”

She got to her feet and dashed away her tears angrily. “I will,” she said, and walked away, wand at the ready.

Eriol allowed himself a small, smug smile, before continuing his moonlit walk.

He saw Sakura fly by, and worried for her. But he didn’t follow.

…I’ll miss the winter
A world of fragile things
Look for me in the white forest
Hiding in a hollow tree (come find me)
I know you hear me
I can taste it in your tears…


Sakura paused and hovered in midair. “Rowan?” she asked in surprise.

“The net,” she said breathlessly. “The spell. It is being fed power and will activate soon.”

“Nani?” Sakura breathed. “But how?”

“Come,” said Rowan. “Get above and you’ll see.”

Sakura guided her staff straight up through the canopy of the trees, and then higher so that the net of magic appeared before her in the center of the forest where the most intensive fighting took place, in the glow of the fire. Rowan is right, she thought to herself. The net was getting power. But from what?
She felt a chill, and a sense of urgency swept through her. The fighting was concentrated above the net, which extended for acres and acres. They couldn’t stay there, something was going to happen, and soon.

“Death,” she hissed suddenly. Death was powering the spell. The extinguishing of the life force of both enemies and allies added more and more power. In very little time it would be fully charged. And then what?

She shot off back down into the forest with an absentminded thanks to the spirit. She didn’t want to find out what it was meant for. She needed Dumbledore, or even Minerva. Needed to warn them so they could evacuate that area.

Sakura thrust her thoughts at Syaoran and Eriol. Chaotic and unorganized as they were, it took them a moment to decipher them, but in moments they headed in the direction indicated, under the pretense of exterminating the forest fire.

Her heart was in her throat as she recklessly wove through the trees. One wrong move could land her with a serious injury, but it was past time for caution.

A professor. Sakura stayed near the ground, searching. A professor would know where either Heads of Hogwarts were. She mentally called upon Shield, unable to dodge the spells sent her way as she passed through the outer edges of the battle.

Short, spiked gray hair caught her eye, and she swerved in the witch’s direction, quickly ducking a branch. It was, as she had suspected, Xiomara Hooch. Blood dripped from a deep cut on her arm, soaking through her makeshift bandage. She was struggling to defend herself with her left hand, and it was obvious that she was not ambidextrous. It was difficult to tell in the dark, but her skin was ashen, a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead. She swayed from blood loss, and a Bludgeoning Hex punched straight through her shield.

“Oh, shit…” Xiomara hissed, and braced herself for impact. Which never came.

She cracked an eye open, and then stared. There was a girl hovering next to her, on the strangest broom she had ever seen. It had a long pink shaft, and where the twigs should have been large, brilliant white wings extended from a star. The Flying Instructor was absolutely fascinated, and whether it was due to her flying obsession or blood loss, she forgot for a moment that she was in the middle of a battle.

“Quick!” shouted Sakura, jolting her back into the present. “You need a Healer.”

Xiomara clambered on with ease born of practice, and only then glanced toward where her opponents had been. They were buried neck deep in the ground and unconscious.

“I need Minerva or Dumbledore,” Sakura said tensely as they took off above the treetops and headed towards Hogwarts. “Where are they?”

Hooch regarded her with suspicion, suddenly questioning the wisdom of allowing a stranger to transport her anywhere. “Why do you ask?” she questioned gruffly.

“Voldemort set a trap. They need to evacuate most of the forest, quickly, before it goes off,” Sakura replied with thinly veiled panic.

The witch gasped, and then winced as she jarred her arm. “They went to take care of the fire before it burned down the entire forest.”

“Kuso,” Sakura hissed. “That’s put them right in the middle of it!”
“Go down,” Xiomara ordered suddenly, her hawk-like eyes picking out a nearly hidden shape. Sakura obeyed, spiraling downward and landing as gently as she could. Her companion had already stumbled over to the roots of a giant tree where a small form was huddled, unconscious.

“Pomona,” she murmured.

The Card Mistress murmured her thanks to the spirit of the tree for protecting and hiding the plant witch from unfriendly eyes, before pursing her lips and whistling a long, drawn-out note that seemed to hang heavy in the air.

“What are you doing?” Xiomara whispered harshly.

“Calling for help,” Sakura replied, checking Professor Sprout’s pulse. “I can’t carry three people.”

It took only moments before Keroberos glided down to his mistress. “Your safe,” he breathed, and fondly bumped his head against her.

The Card Mistress rubbed his cheek in reassurance. “I’m all right. But you need to take these two to the castle. They both need Healers.” She gestured toward the witches. Madam Hooch had sunk to her knees, out of shock at the appearance of a winged lion and loss of adrenaline that had kept her up despite severe injuries.

Carefully and quickly, Sakura levitated them onto Kero’s back, Xiomara holding Pomona in place. “How’s Yue?” she asked quietly before her Sun Guardian could bound away.

“Alive and well. The moon is providing him with a boost,” he replied.

Sakura watched him sprint through the woods, and then scowled as she took a closer look at her surroundings. The trees were too tightly packed for take-off, whether she used Fly on her staff or herself. Irritation and worry evident in her features, she allowed Fly to return to its card form, and reached her mind out for Syaoran, pleading for a ride.

Luckily he was close. In his wolf form it had taken less than five minutes to reach her. He slowed to allow her to leap easily onto his back, and then sped up again, sprinting toward the center of the Forbidden Forest.

“I just need enough space to fly,” she said around the lump in her throat. She had been monitoring the trap in the back of her mind, and if she didn’t find Dumbledore almost immediately it would be too late.

Syaoran growled in understanding, and she sighed as she buried her fingers in his thick fur.

There’s a large open space coming up, Syaoran informed her at last, and she drew Fly again, throwing the card forward as far as she could, and then striking it with her staff as they passed. Wings materialized on her back, and the wind caught them, nearly lifting her up before she could fold them back. She scrambled frantically to keep her seat.

Syaoran yipped and whined as she accidentally ripped out chunks of fur.

“You’re hardly going to go bald, Syaoran,” Sakura replied with some amusement mixed into her apologetic tone, before her expression became serious once again.

They burst into a clearing, Syaoran jumping onto a log and then, powerful hind legs bunching, he leapt forward as high as he could. Sakura snapped her wings open, wincing a little at the strain as
they caught the wind and blew her up into the air.

Thank you, she called mentally as Syaoran’s wolf form melted into the night and she arrowed toward the forest fire. Everything seemed different, almost hellish, in the firelight. She could hardly tell friend from foe in all the chaos. How would she be able to find the people she was looking for?

There! As if by magic, Sakura caught a glimpse of familiar emerald green robes and swooped down to the forest floor.

Too late.

She knew the moment the net became fully charged. Even if she caught Minerva, there was no time to evacuate the area. The surroundings dissolved, space melting into darkness before reassembling itself again.

Sakura jerked back up and hovered. In the confusion she had lost sight of Minerva. She looked around, examining this new place. There were trees here as well, but the woods weren't nearly as big as the Forbidden Forest, and there was a large, open area ending in a steep drop. She could almost hear the waves of the sea crashing against the rocky cliffs. They were something to be wary of, but Sakura was much more concerned with the army waiting for them. They had been holding their own in the forest, but here they were outnumbered at least three to one by forces that were fresh and ready for a fight.

She narrowed her eyes. It was time to become more aggressive.

“Watery!” she shouted, summoning the sprite.

A giant wave of icy seawater rose high above the ground. People screamed at the sight, several abandoning their opponents to flee. It crashed to the ground, specifically targeting Voldemort supporters, sweeping them off their feet, and carrying them away. Some crashed into trees and boulders. Others drowned. It brought little respite from the fighting. The numbers were not so overwhelming, but the brutality had not been minimized.

Sakura watched, and it seemed as though her emotions were far from her. She knew that she would have nightmares for a long time to come, but at present the horror seemed not to touch her. The ground was already becoming slick with blood. Here there were many fewer shadows to hide the atrocities. She did what she could, trapping enemies in the earth, ice, and trees, even conjuring chains and bars and cages. She defended and healed the worst injuries, but her power was not limitless, and she needed to be careful, to use her magic at such a pace that she could hold out longer than the enemy.

If the Light wizards and witches were unnerved by what had happened, and the measures taken in their defense by some strange, unknown force, there was no time to hesitate. Distracted as they were by battle, they could only place their faith in some ally, or even, some believed, Albus Dumbledore himself.

…Holding my last breath
Safe inside myself
Are all my thoughts of you
Sweet raptured light it ends here tonight…


“Tonks....” He looked upon her battered body in horror.
“Always was…bit clumsy. Dunno how…passed Steal and…Tracking.” Her chuckle was strained and quickly turned into a grimace as blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth.

“Shh. We need to get you to a Mediwitch,” Arthur told her gently.

“No cure for…this poison.” She gestured weakly to the scratch across her stomach already green and oozing with pus.

“We’ll find something to help.” Arthur was desperate. She was too young, too cheerful to die here and now.

Tonks went into a coughing fit, blood pouring out of her mouth in spurts. “Hurts,” she gasped, tears filling her eyes.

“I can’t heal this,” said a new voice, low and gentle, “but I can take away the pain.”

Tonks suddenly realized that her head rested in someone’s lap and noticed Arthur staring past her, eyes wide, hand gripping his wand.

“A quick death is all I can offer,” said the voice as hands stroked her short, spiky hair.

Tonks managed to crane her neck back to look at the person and a small smile played upon her lips despite the pain when she saw the pearly white wings.

“Angel?” she asked.

The girl gave a short laugh, eyes overbright with unshed tears. “I wish,” she murmured. “My name is Sakura Kinomoto.”

She looked up at Arthur Weasley. “You’re needed on the field,” she told him quietly.

He would have protested, but when he saw her green eyes filled with power he had never before seen he, he found he couldn’t.

“I always liked your hair pink,” he told Tonks. His final farewell.

“So similar…Weasley red,” she managed to say before streaks of bright red appeared in her mousy brown hair, all she could manage to do in her state.

“So full of life,” Arthur heard the girl – Sakura – say sadly as he walked back to the fighting, refusing to look back as his tears finally trickled down his cheeks. He thought he heard Buddhist gongs ring faintly, causing goosebumps to appear on his arms.

Sakura watched Arthur Weasley walk away before moving her wings forward to partially cover the two of them.

“Tell them…goodbye,” requested Tonks faintly. “Love…”

“I will,” Sakura whispered reassuringly as she set the Metamorphmagus’ soul free of her body. “I will.”

“Give the God of Death my regards,” Sakura told the radiant spirit with a bow. “Tell him the Card Mistress is taking up her responsibility.”

Tonks’ soul bowed, smiling, before speeding away with a grace she’d never possessed in life. She was a streak of light, a shooting star, and then she was gone. Only then did she launch herself into the air, murder in her eyes, twin trails of tears forgotten on her cheeks. Voldemort would suffer for
this. It ended now.

…Closing your eyes to disappear
You pray your dreams will leave you here
But still you wake and know the truth
No one’s there…

Nero and Orion crouched in a ravine, pale and terrified. They attempted to quiet their gasps, but
the shouting and fighting drowned out what little noise they made. Orion had his head in his
hands, and was visibly shaking. This wasn’t what they had expected. Not at all. They’d been
young and idealistic, thinking of the glory and honor that could be won on the battlefield. The
reality was far different than they could have imagined.

They’d joined because they had believed in the cause. Best friends for years, they saw Their
world was being threatened, needed to be defended at any cost. With their help, the Wizarding
World would become all that it was meant to be.

If the conditions weren’t exactly what they’d expected, if their reception had not exactly been
warm or welcoming, if they’d been worked harder than they’d even been before, well, it was all
for the greater good, wasn’t it?

Muggles and Mudbloods were polluting the Wizarding World, non-magic barbarians weakening
the magic and traditions that had been part of Wizarding society since the beginning. Forcing their
betters into hiding…. It was unbearable!

Orion took a deep breath and pulled himself together. Turning he looked his best friend and
unnatural brother directly in the face. Their masks had been lost long ago.

“Shall we?” he asked. “One last charge for our cause?”

Nero grinned the grin of a near-fanatic. “We’ll go down in a blaze of glory, at least.”

Taking a deep breath, the two leapt out of the ravine and charged wands drawn and screaming the
first spells that came to mind.

Syaoran watched them come, amber eyes calculating. His sword had been bloodied many times
over. He was becoming familiar to the feel of steel slicing through flesh and bone.

They were young and unskilled. No challenge at all.

His thoughts flickered for a moment to Sakura, and he sighed. Sakura had always believed in
mercy.

A quick one-handed cartwheel and dodge to the side, careful of the slick grass, and he was upon
the two, their spells having completely missed him. His blade flashed in the moonlight, and he
swung with all of his considerable might.

The flat of his sword caught one of them in the back, sending him tumbling head over heels.
Before the boy had even hit the ground, Syaoran thrust his hand back, the pommel of his sword
neatly striking the second young Death Eater in the temple. He dropped like a sack of potatoes,
and the sorcerer took a moment to render the first boy unconscious before leaving them where
they lay.

Their lives were in the hands of the gods now.

…Say goodnight
Don’t be afraid  
Calling me calling me as you fade to black…

Minerva hated battle, hated the never-ending chaos. She was a creature of organization.

She hated the killing.

Albus had disappeared again. The people she was fighting near she knew only by sight, and an inexplicably lonely feeling tugged at her emotions as she finally dispatched her vampire opponent. Minerva paused a moment to catch her breath, ignoring her numerous scratches as she carefully observed her surroundings.

She had no idea where they were or how they had gotten here. Anti-Disapparition and anti-Portkey wards had been in place upon their arrival, and there had been no time to investigate while a fresh wave of the Dark Lord’s army joined the opponents they had already been battling.

Minerva was no longer sure what was going on, and she had a sinking feeling that Albus didn’t either. It had all begun with her accidental trip to Japan, and the strange occurrences had only increased, what with Sakura apparently haunting Hogwarts, and her friends shadowing the Ministry building. And then Remus, when he had howled at the sight of Greyback in the distance and taken off, changing into werewolf form mid-stride, as though he were an Animagus, shocking all in his vicinity. The Deputy suspected Sakura’s involvement, but there was no time to dwell on it with the Death Eaters upon them and the Forbidden Forest in flames.

Minerva felt someone behind her and spun, a shield spell on her lips when she was struck down by a “Crucio.” She screamed and writhed under the pain worse than a thousand knives diggings and twisting and burning.

When it finally lifted she could do no more than lay there panting, her throat raw.

“And so we meet again, McGonagall,” came the voice that set her skin crawling and the hairs on the back of her neck standing up. “You have much to answer for. But first…” You-Know-Who hissed the spell to turn inanimate objects into a knife, and Minerva watched, speechless with horror as his wand slowly but surely began to change. The end result was still wooden, but it had flattened and broadened a bit, one side sharp and coated with an acid green poison.

To transfigure a wand, especially one’s own, took an almost unimaginable amount of power. Crude as it appeared, for him to even do the transfiguration halfway…. Voldemort was certainly and unfortunately one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

And she was at his mercy.

Her trembling hand raised her wand, and she tried to push herself up, but the Dark Lord merely made a motion, and she was suddenly flying through the air toward him. Her legs were quickly paralyzed, like a Petrificus charm, and he gripped her arm with one hand, holding the knife against her throat.

Minerva closed her eyes momentarily in fear. If the knife didn’t kill her, the poison certainly would. They had yet to discover an antidote, if, indeed, there was one.

“DUMBLEDORE!” Voldemort roared, his voice echoing over the battlegrounds.

…Holding my last breath  
Safe inside myself  
Are all my thoughts of you  
Sweet raptured light it ends here tonight
Albus heard the shout and immediately recognized the voice. Activity slowed to a stop. Eyes narrowing, he searched for Tom Riddle and quickly spotted him. He stood on a grassy rise ending in cliffs. The area around the evil wizard was clear, no one wanting or daring to be near him.

When Albus saw who Voldemort held captive, her green eyes wide in fear, he froze. A fear such as he had never felt before invaded him, and his body was icy cold. He couldn’t move, for once could barely breath or think. For a moment his genius failed him.

Then he was walking, wanting, needing to be nearer to Minerva, to rescue her.

“Stop there, old man,” Voldemort said when Albus reached the edge of the crowd.

Unwillingly, angrily, he stopped.

“Lower your wand. Surrender to me and I will let her go.”

“No! Albus, don’t – ” Minerva began frantically, only to be cut off by the knife/wand pressing more firmly into her skin, nearly breaking her skin. She froze and pleaded with Albus with her eyes, begging him not to give in. She could see the internal war waging within him, and there was only one way to solve it. She would have to take the decision out of his hands. Taking as deep a breath as she could manage, Minerva closed her eyes and prepared to move forward onto the knife.

Albus realized what she was about to do, a split second before she moved. But before he could shout, a new voice said, “Enough.”

Suddenly the knife/wand was a more comfortable two inches rather than two millimeters from Minerva’s neck. She blinked in surprise when she saw the charm she had received from Sakura was what was keeping the sharp edge at bay. Then feeling returned to her legs, and she wasted no time in escaping and racing to Albus’ side. The two stood, side by side as they watched the girl glide to the ground on wings that disappeared the moment she touched down.

“Sakura,” Minerva breathed, and Albus gently squeezed her shoulder, feeling how she trembled from her near brush with death.

“What do you think you are doing, little girl?” Voldemort hissed in fury.

She regarded him with cold eyes. His aura had been easy to spot, twisted and thick and choking with evil as it was. “Your reign of terror ends here, wizard. As Card Mistress I judge and condemn you for the unforgivable atrocities you have committed. Your actions have spilled over to affect those beyond your world, and I am here, as is my right, to put a stop to it. You have the chance to battle for your freedom. If I am victorious and you still live, you shall be stripped of your powers and imprisoned until the God of Death possesses your soul. No one shall interfere.”

“Very well, girl. You have a death wish I shall gladly and painfully grant you,” he said, blood-red eyes alight, and he swung his weapon down toward her.

Many of the Dark Lord’s supporters in the crowd moved to assist him, but Eriol and Syaoran were quicker. The two paralyzed any who would interfere or even attempt to kill any spectators. Remember the net trap, they created something similar, using a person’s own magic to keep them frozen. Soon, the majority of the group was frozen.

Meanwhile, Sakura had stopped the knife’s descent by clapping her hands together, holding the blade with her fingertips and the help of magic.
“That’s a pathetic attempt at transforming an object,” Sakura observed scornfully. She quickly let go of the weapon and twisted away, flipping backwards and out of his reach. Leaving her key alone for the moment, she drew her own wand and faced him.

“To transfigure my wand, that is the mark of the most powerful wizard in the world!” he said, nearly spitting in fury.

“Pathetic and weak,” Sakura said. “Expelliarmus!”

He blocked it easily, and she dodged his return fire. Sakura attempted a few other spells, but she knew very little of witchcraft. In a short time Voldemort had managed to summon her wand, although Sakura herself was hardly injured. The wizard might have much more experience than she did, but she was much quicker and more nimble.

“I’ll kill you with your own wand and delight in the irony of your death,” Riddle said with a mad, high-pitched laugh. “Imperio!” He frowned when nothing happened and cast the spell again, pouring his magic into the girl’s strange red wand. “Imperio!”

It exploded in his hand, and he screamed as sharp pieces of wood buried itself into his hand.

Sakura was not very surprised. The wand had, after all, been made with her blood, and she was firmly aligned with purity and goodness.

Bellowing in rage, the Dark Lord shot wave after wave of curses at her, but Sakura was prepared. She summoned her staff and called upon Shield, a pink bubble deflecting his attacks away from her and back at him. Hastily putting his own shield up, the spells were absorbed in a flash of light.

The duel began in earnest. Syaoran watched worriedly, Minerva and Albus were in awe, as Sakura dodged and flipped herself through the area, swinging herself into trees and leaping out of them.

She summoned Firey upside down in midair, and the wizard barely withstood the onslaught. Earthy shook the ground so violently that Voldemort was thrown to his knees. Jump kept Sakura away from unfriendly spells and Shield defended her. Although Sakura used her sorcery in other ways, she relied mainly upon her cards and the Dark Lord noticed.

“When you are dead I will take those cards from your corpse and use such great power to destroy the world,” he sneered. She had been knocked unconscious for a moment, and he had thought to take advantage of that to finish her off. Instead, the cards had defended her, bobbing in midair and circling her, waking and protecting her under their own power.

Sakura laughed humorlessly, even as she pressed her hands to her bloody side, putting pressure on the large cut. “Even if you managed to gain my cards, even if you had the power to summon them, they would never obey you.”

She didn’t notice the motes of golden light gather around the silver bracelet she had received long ago from Eriol and Tomoyo the moment her blood touched it. But she did notice the flash of light and feel something metal encase her forearm and extend to cover the back of her hand.

“What?” she murmured, confused as she stared at the armguard.

“Diffindo!”

Moving on instinct, Sakura brought her right arm up to block the spell, hand in a fist. It was absorbed into the gleaming silver metal.
Her eyes sought out Eriol in the crowd. You didn’t mention this when you gave me that bracelet. You just said to keep it on at all times.

Surprise, he replied with the barest hint of a smile. She could sense his worry, but there was nothing she could do to assuage it.

Something exploded at her feet, and she shrieked bringing her arms up to her face as she leaped backwards. “Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort shouted, and Sakura adjusted the angle of her arm to block it. The deadly green light impacted with the armguard and shoved Sakura back even as the silver metal cracked and crumbled out of existence.

Hmmm, Eriol commented to Syaoran in his mind. That Killing Curse is more powerful than we suspected. The guard should have lasted much longer than merely two spells.

Sakura’s eyes widened in panic when she realized that she’d been pushed to the very edge of the cliffs. Her arms wind-milled as she struggled to regain her balance, but her opponent gave her no respite.

With no other choice, Sakura leaped awkwardly into the air and dove backward into the open air.

“This is too close!” Syaoran shouted in spite of himself, breath caught in his throat.

His shout drew the attention of Voldemort, as well as Albus and Minerva. Her hand tightened on the Headmaster’s arm, letting him know that she recognized this boy as well, even as tears gathered in her eyes at Sakura’s fall.

They almost missed her return.

That was a little too close, Sakura sent to Eriol and Syaoran, a little breathlessly. They sighed in relief.

Wings flapping silently, she rose above their heads, hovering for a minute before diving at her enemy. Voldemort turned just as she reached him. Her feet impacted with his chest, and there was an audible snap as he flew backward and hit a tree before collapsing to the ground.

Coughing and hissing, the Dark Lord struggle to his feet. “You will pay!”

“This ends now,” Sakura said stoically. “Windy!”

The spirit emerged from the card and immediately surrounded the wizard, spinning faster and faster. Oxygen was being sucked away, and Voldemort was soon clutching at his throat and gasping as he slowly suffocated. At last he sank to his knees.

Sakura frowned. There was something wrong here. Something off. And then she realized what it was. His spirit was hovering. It made no motion to move on. It was as though something was tying him to the living world. She narrowed her eyes, and completely unveiled her Sight, at last seeing what should have been obvious. Something was tying his spirit to the living world, some sort of anchor or bond.

“No!” she shouted and immediately recalled Windy. If his spirit escaped, she might never be able to find it again.

Sakura’s eyes followed the silver light of the cord that denoted the bond. Up a tree? she wondered to herself curiously. And then she saw the figures hidden in that tree.

“Harry Potter?” she said, and her voice carried far in the unnatural silence.
“Sakura, look out!” Syaoran shouted.

She turned just as a slowly recovering Voldemort gasped out, “Avada Kedavra.”

Guided by instinct and improvisation, she made no move to draw a card. Instead, her staff shrank back into a key and appeared around her hair. Time seemed to slow as the deadly green spell drew closer. Sakura made no move to dodge or get out of the way. Her arms remained loose at her side.

At last, the Killing Curse seemed to strike her, and she flew backward. It tore through the first shield Sakura had created, and she frantically created a second, more powerful shield just before it touched her skin. She hit the ground hard, her body limp, and skidded several feet, wincing and biting her lip to keep from crying out.

Minerva bit back a sob, and a stunned disbelief settled over the entire crowd. The girl had seemed so powerful, so capable of defeating the Dark Lord. And now, so suddenly, she was dead.

“Harry Potter she said?” Voldemort said loudly. “Indeed, I do sense you Potter. Come out. You shall have the honor of being killed personally.”

Harry was pale, shaking almost imperceptibly from the shock of the girl’s death. She’d known he was here. It was his fault she’d been taken unaware and killed. What had he done? How had he distracted her? Had his branch moved? His Invisibility Cloak slipped?

“Harry, don’t. Don’t do it,” Hermione murmured, voice trembling with fear and worry.

“I have to. You know I do. I…I love you guys,” he whispered, and then slipped out from the cloak and dropped to the ground. He could do this. The girl had weakened the Dark Lord severely. He wouldn’t let her death be in vain.

The duel began immediately, spells flying back and forth. Minerva and Albus, unable to simply watch as one of their students went up against a wizard with decades more experience, moved to assist.

“I wouldn’t do that,” said a cultured voice, and they started, turning to stare at the boy who had so suddenly appeared at their side. Moonlight glinted off his glasses and dark, almost blue, hair. “The rules still stand. No interference is allowed.”

Before either protested, another figure stumbled up to them, supported by Syaoran.

“That’s going to leave a bruise,” Sakura murmured with a painful grimace, rubbing her chest where the curse had hit.


“Shield. Two of them. That curse was more powerful than I realized,” Sakura mumbled, leaning her head against Syaoran’s shoulder. “I would have killed him if I could,” she said softly, eyes closed. “But that would have killed Potter-san as well. If Potter-san is to have a chance to survive, then he must be the one to kill Voldemort.”

The five of them watched in silence. For a while Harry seemed to have the upper hand, but a lucky shot threw him to the ground. Unable to defend himself, the young wizard was stupefied and found himself completely at the Dark Lord’s mercy.

The sorcerers felt the shift in the air right before both Minerva and Albus moved forward. Syaoran moved to stop them, but Sakura put a hand on his arm.

Their auras were changing, growing, from silver to an almost blinding white. Even the wizards and witches could see the halo of light surrounding the two. Sakura’s gaze was drawn to the tree Harry had been hiding in, and she saw four others, one a spirit, with similar auras. And last, Sakura looked to Harry, unsurprised to see that he completed this group of seven.

“A powerful number,” Eriol murmured as the three watched what was going on raptly.

Guided by some instinct they didn’t understand, barely conscious of what was happening, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny threw aside their Invisibility Cloaks. They were strangely unsurprised to see Draco’s spirit appear among them. He belonged right here, right now, and not distance nor magical coma would interfere with that.

The seven of them contained within them seven ancient souls, the protectors of the British Isles. They were not and never would be conscious of this. The memories and power of these spirits would overwhelm and destroy their human bodies should they remain awake and active for more than a moment.

They had walked together since the beginning of time. They had walked together in each subsequent reincarnation, gathering together when times were dark and dire, and evil threatened their cherished lands. They had been kings and warrior queens, soldiers and homeless paupers, Fae and human in all their myriad incarnations. But always, they had unknowingly found their way to each other.

They had always come together in times of great power and struggle, one or the other becoming leader by chance. They were content to sleep within their hose until the moment the peril to their islands was at its greatest, and then beware! For history is powerful, the history of the Isles especially so, and history has a habit of repeating itself.


Voldemort barely managed to surround himself in a large shield of water as a wall of flames descended upon him.

“Water,” said Ginny, and the wizard’s shield collapsed upon him. Nearly inhaling the liquid, he forced a bubble of air around his mouth.

“Wind,” Draco commanded, and the water splashed to the ground as a howling gale threatened to carry the battered Dark Lord away. He quickly summoned a large wall of solid rock.

“Earth.” Ron was next, allowing Voldemort no respite. He was forced to quickly hover in the air as the ground below him gaped open like a yawning mouth. His concentration on the wall lost, it disappeared.

“Dark,” Albus said, and a pitch black darkness that no light could penetrate. When Voldemort began to cast wildly, Minerva stepped in.

“Light.”

Voldemort cried out as the brilliant burst of light burned his eyes, especially after the all-encompassing darkness. Beaten, nearly broken, he lay on the ground before Harry.

“Death,” said Harry quietly, and the Dark Lord Voldemort died.

In that moment the nearly omniscient awareness left the seven avatars, and they blinked in
confusion, memories clouded and fuzzy. Draco’s spirit disappeared, and Harry Potter collapsed.

“Harry!” screamed Hermione, and the three scrambled out of the trees. Just as they reached the small wizard, a shockwave seemed to emanate from Riddle’s corpse, and they were summoned into darkness, the last revenge of a mad man.

Sakura was surprised and nearly resisted before realizing that she should follow and allowed it to take her. She would never forgive herself if she let those six die because of her reluctance.

Syaoran very nearly resisted until he felt Sakura become swept along, Eriol following after. With a sigh of frustration he dove after them just before the spell dissipated.

The wizards and witches left behind, those who had been frozen now released, stared at where the small group had stood a moment before.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were curious, I wrote down which gods and goddesses I was thinking of when I chose who and what elements they would wield.

Dumbledore – Merlin
Minerva – Minerva (Roman)
Harry – Arthur
Hermione – Brighit
Draco – Mabon
Ron – the Daghda/Finn MacCool?
Ginny – the Morrigan

Also, for past lives Dumbledore as Taliesin, Minerva as the Lady of the Lake and Queen of the Sidhe during Ireland’s waves of invasion, Ginny as Guinevere and a warrior queen, Hermione as a high priestess of Avalon, and Draco as a King of the Sidhe.

These were just some of my thoughts, not really important. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Night Black, Blood Red.
Rise to Meet the End

Chapter Summary

I’m frightened by what I see
But somehow I know that there’s much more to come
Immobilized by my fear
And soon to be blinded by tears
I can stop the pain if I will it all away…
Fallen angels at my feet
Whispered voices at my ear
Death before my eyes
Lying next to me I fear
She beckons me shall I give in
Upon my end shall I begin
Forsaking all I’ve fallen for I rise to meet the end.
-Evanescence, “Whisper”

Tyrants smile with their last breath
For they know that at their death,
Tyranny just changes hands,
Serfdom lives on in their lands.
-Heinrich Heine, “King David”

Father, O Father, what do we here
In this land of unbelief and fear?
The land of dreams is better far,
Above the light of the morning star.
-William Blake

Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city…Too many fragments of the spirit have I scattered in these streets, and too many are the children of my longing that walk naked among these hills…
-Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

Disconcerted by the all-consuming darkness, it took Sakura several moments to realize that she had stopped falling. It seemed, instead, that she hung in a black void, without even the faintest light. She opened her mouth to call out to the others, and then stopped herself. If there were other people out there, other things….

Sakura sent out her awareness instead, touching on the welcoming minds of Eriol and Syaoran, passing those of the wizards and witches, and reaching further. She stiffened, squeaking in distress as her hair stood on end.
“Hoe,” she whimpered, the noise lost in the minor chaos that erupted from the Hogwarts group as they realized that “Lumos” didn’t work. There were dead people floating around in there. Not ghosts – she would definitely be screaming then – or spirits, but corpses.

Kami-sama, but she was creeped out.

“Lumos solemn!” One of the younger witches was beginning to sound a bit hysterical as the light spells continued to not work when Eriol brought Sakura’s attention back to the present.

“Sakura-chan, if you would?” he said in his cultured voice, sounding perfectly composed.

“Ah! Gomen.” She gripped her staff, and withdrew one of her cards. “Glow!”

Immediately, and to the relief of everyone, small balls of glowing light hovered at various heights in midair, enough that they could see each other clearly. To Sakura’s relief, no corpses were near enough to be visible.

“Harry!” screamed Ginny, and everyone’s attention was diverted to the unconscious form of the Boy-Who-Lived.

“Stand back,” Minerva ordered as she knelt down beside Harry, and everyone but Dumbledore immediately obeyed. Turning the boy onto his back, the two inhaled sharply.

“What?” Ron demanded. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s been poisoned,” the Transfiguration Mistress whispered, tracing the cut that glowed a sickly green.

“No, no, Harry,” moaned Hermione. “He can’t be. He can’t.”

“You must be able to do something,” Ginny protested helplessly. “His life is finally his own, he defeated You-Know-Who. This isn’t fair.”

“I am sorry, Miss Weasley,” Albus said softly, his blue eyes betraying his sorrow, “but no one has been able to create an antidote. And even if there was something that could be done, we are trapped here in this space.”

Sakura bit her lip. She couldn’t heal him, she wasn’t strong enough now. But there was something she could do. Glancing at her two companions, the Card Mistress sought out and received their acceptance, however reluctantly on Syaoran’s part. “There is something that can be done,” she spoke at last. “But the outcome relies on your strength of will.”

The children jumped, having failed to notice the sorcerers’ presence.

“But,” Ron stuttered artlessly. “You’re dead!”

Sakura looked down at herself. “Not really. I underestimated the power in that curse, though, and nearly didn’t get a second shield up in time. I certainly have the bruise to prove it.”

The red-headed boy’s eyes bugged out, and the brunette seemed speechless.

“Now,” Sakura said quickly, hoping to move past her apparently impossible feat. “Choose two from among you, one to hold Harry’s arms and the other to hold his legs. You must care for him, love him, for this to work, and you must not let go of him, whatever happens.”

Ron and Hermione spared barely a glance before stepping forward.
“We’ve been with Harry from the beginning,” she said, voice soft and determined, “and we’ll be with him to the end.”

Sakura nodded, regarding the pair solemnly. “Do you know the tale of Tam Lin?”

Ron turned to Hermione who nodded apprehensively.

“Can you hold onto him in spite of the terror and pain?” Sakura asked. “You must be sure. There is no shame if you cannot. Harry Potter will not survive if you let him go.”

“I can,” they said, almost in unison.

“All right,” the sorceress murmured. “Hold onto him.” They did so, and though Sakura did not make any overt signs of working magic, the air around them seemed weighed down with the force of it.

And then the body of Harry Potter warped and melted in a way that was nauseating to watch, until his two closest friends were struggling to cling to a serpent nearly as large as the basilisk had been. Hermione dug her fingernails into the scaly body as it tried to fling her away, while Ron hugged the tail close, ignoring how it whipped him about. The creature was difficult to hold onto, wiggling as it was, and it nearly escaped before the next transformation.

And those who were not a part of the struggle could do nothing but watch, no matter the burning curiosity directed at the three strangers. Almost without noticing, Ginny sought comfort in Minerva’s robes, while the woman gripped Albus’ arm.

Sakura watched fiercely. They can do this, she thought. They will do this. Willing it to be true.

Eriol chanted under his breath the last verses from the ancient ballad:

They'll turn me in your arms, lady,
Into an esk and adder;
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
I am your bairn's father.

They'll turn me to a bear sae grim,
And then a lion bold;
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
And ye shall love your child.

Again they'll turn me in your arms
To a red het gand of aim;
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
I'll do to you nae harm.

And last they'll turn me in your arms
Into the burning gleed;
Then throw me into well water,
O throw me in with speed.

The snake shifted, melted in that dizzying, sickening way and the young witch and wizard found themselves clinging to the hairy legs of a giant spider. Ron whimpered, but refused to release the person who had become a brother to him. Hermione screamed as the pincers snapped at her, dripping a strange fluid, but she kept hold of him. “Harry!” she shouted, because that was all she could do, and imagined the friendly boy with messy black hair and sparkling green eyes.
They had to save him. They had to. He had given up so much, done so much for others. They owed it to him. They wanted him in their lives.

The spider transformed into a lion that released a deafening roar that shook their very bones, and the pair trembled. The brunette witch jerked her head to the side so that the creature’s jaws closed on her bushy hair. Ron bit back a warning, and then gasped as the lion lashed out with its back legs, scoring three lines of blood down his side. His fingers slipped, and he desperately latched onto the lashing tail before he completely lost Harry.

The lion roared again, but Ron determinedly ignored it as he inched his way back to where he could grasp the legs. He had barely touched the golden fur before it changed to gray.

The wolf let loose a chilling howl, but there was something...off about it. And then Hermione realized what was wrong and wished she hadn’t. “Werewolf,” she gasped, and Ron’s face lost all color when he heard. It reared back the paw Hermione hadn’t been able to hold, and swatted at her. She shrieked, fearing that it had cracked a rib, but she was frozen with terror, couldn’t let go even if she wanted to. It wrenched its top half about and the witch abruptly found herself airborne, swinging onto its back. She managed to get the werewolf into a sort of chokehold, one arm wrapped around its throat, and the other under its arm.

A thought struck her. Was this form that of a true werewolf? If it bit her…

She nearly let go. Then she remembered. This was Harry’s life hanging in the balance. He was worth it.

When it transformed she slipped forward and off the back, but still she held on. Within her arms was a long, slender neck, and when the creature hissed, Hermione feared Harry had become another serpent. Then she realized that she also held the point where a wing merged with a body. It was only a swan, though a rather large one. Then it beat the two about the head with its powerful wings, and Hermione saw that she had underestimated the bird. Ron had as well, it seemed, for he shouted in a panicked tone and lunged for the webbed feet. One wing caught him on the temple, and he saw stars.

“Harry!” Hermione shrieked, watching with horror the dazed, concussed look in Ron’s eyes as his hands tightened convulsively around the legs. “Harry stop! Please!”

Sakura watched them, hands covering her mouth. “Almost done,” she whispered. “Almost done.”

“Please,” Minerva breathed, gripping Albus’ arm tightly. “Please,” they prayed.

The bird, entrapped by the young man and woman, shrank until it became an iron bar, glowing cherry red with heat. Hermione sobbed in pain as the hot metal seared her hands. “C’mom, mate,” Ron choked out. “That’s enough.” Their tears dripped onto the bar, sizzling every time they connected with the hot iron. At last, after what seemed an eternity, the glow burst into a blinding flash of light. When they at last could see, their eyes immediately fell on the young, black-haired wizard.

His bright green eyes fluttered open, and he groaned as he sat up. “Uh, hey guys,” he said uncertainly, looking from Hermione to Ron and taking in their strange expressions. “What’s going on?”

“Harry!” Hermione shrieked and threw herself at him.

“’Mione,” he gasped. “Need…breathe….”

She let go with an embarrassed expression, and Harry took in a deep breath only to lose it as Ron
slapped him on the back. “You almost died, mate,” he explained, swiping away tears. “It’s good to have you back.”

He helped the confused wizard to his feet as the professors and Ginny approached, all looking relieved and grateful beyond words. Harry rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed by all the attention. Then he caught sight of the three sorcerers. “You!” he gasped, staring at Sakura.

“Me?” the Card Mistress asked, looking confused.

“I saw you with that bard.”

And once again the focus returned to the mysterious strangers.

“Ah,” she said, scratching her head sheepishly. “You saw that. I really am bad at this sneaking around thing.”

“I only caught a glance of you,” Harry said.

“My hands!” Ron exclaimed suddenly, staring at them, and then prodded his side. “And my robes! I’m not bleeding.”

“My hands are fine as well,” Hermione said with a frown. “They don’t even ache.”

“The pain was mental rather than physical,” Eriol explained briefly. “They were an illusion.”

“I think,” Dumbledore said in a tone that brooked no argument, “that it is time you told us who and what you are.”

“Not a demon,” Sakura mumbled petulantly, remembering the staff meeting she had crashed.


Sakura looked helplessly at Syaoran, who was glowering at everyone, and then faced the elderly wizard. “Gomen nasai. Eigo ga wakarimasen.” She gave them a confused little smile.

“But you,” Ron sputtered indignantly before a sharp glance from Professor McGonagall stopped him.

“Daijoubu,” the Animagus stated calmly. “Nihongo wo hanasemasu.”

Sakura sighed resignedly. “I forgot about that. Would you believe that this was a mass hallucination?”

They weren’t buying it. Not even the gullible red-head.

“Damn,” Syaoran muttered. He hadn’t really thought that would work, and neither had Sakura, but they had hoped.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore suggested mildly, with a steely look in his eye that said they would not sidetrack him, “we should begin with what we do know. You are Sakura Kinomoto, the girl who found and cared for Minerva in her cat form, and you have recently taken to haunting Hogwarts.”

Sakura bowed in greeting.

“You,” he gestured at the boy who bore a remarkable resemblance to Harry Potter, “are Eriol Hiiragizawa, and despite living in London, have taken up temporary residence at the Ministry?”
Eriol performed a flourishing little bow, his infuriatingly knowing grin firmly in place.

Albus turned to the last member of the trio. “You are Syaoran Li, I believe. And if the trend continues, then you must have been spying among the ranks of the Death Eaters. Perhaps the helpful benefactor who assisted in our Madame Hooch’s escape?”

Syaoran gave them a short, sharp nod, expression unreadable.

“My, my. It seems your reputation for omniscience was well-earned,” Eriol commented, seemingly delighted for some unfathomable reason.

Syaoran shot him a disgusted look.

“But not completely accurate,” Albus replied. “For I have no idea just what you three are.”

Sakura sighed, and at last spoke reluctantly. “We are sorcerers.”

Harry was puzzled by the response this caused in his companions. Hermione gasped as Ron and Ginny took a step backward. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged glances loaded with a meaning he didn’t understand. Having only heard of sorcerers from the tales Bran the Bard had sung only a few days ago, he had no idea of the reasons behind the reactions.

“What’s going on?” he asked at last.

Hermione, as always, took it upon herself to explain. “Harry, sorcerers are said to have power beyond imagining, and in all of the stories, things always ended badly for the wizard or witch who encountered them. They were thought to be a myth.”

“But,” Harry protested, frowning a little, “those songs we heard from the Bard. All of the sorcerers there were good, or most of them, anyway.”

“And what is little known,” interrupted Minerva, “is that in the older, original versions of the stories in the Wizarding literature, the sorcerers were generally helpers rather than antagonists.”

“Mum used to tell stories,” Ginny said, and Ron nodded in agreement. “Sorcerers would come for naughty children and steal them away.”

The adults were able to pick out the flicker of pain in the green eyes of Sakura as she traded incredulous glances with her boyfriend.

Eriol, it seemed, was amused. “What would we do with them?”

Ginny and Ron looked at him with equal parts uncertainty and fear.

“The children,” he clarified. “What on earth would we do with them?”

“Be that as it may,” Dumbledore said at last, drawing conversation to a halt. “You have done much for Minerva, and the rest of us. We are certainly in your debt.” It was a subtle reprimand, and Hermione and the Weasleys looked chastened.

Sakura smiled at him, and it was brilliant and guileless. He couldn’t help smiling back.

“Maybe we should find a way out of here before answering questions,” she suggested.

“If you have any ideas, then please share,” Dumbledore said, gesturing expansively. “I’m afraid I am at a complete loss.”
Eriol adopted a thoughtful look. “Sakura, did you sense anything?”

She shivered. “There are quite a few dead bodies. Although one person is still alive, but he seemed strange. There was no thought, no activity, nothing.”

Eriol nodded. “As I thought. They are in stasis, as we would have been had we entered through the proper door. Since Voldemort sent us here through unknown means, we bypassed the door altogether, and so were not put into stasis. We’ll have to remember to bring that person with us when we leave.”

“But how?” Hermione asked, curiosity overcoming her apprehension. “I doubt Apparition or Portkeys would work.”

“We shouldn’t throw our power around either,” Syaoran said unexpectedly. He had been so silent and formidable until then that the children jumped in surprise. “The leader may be gone, but the army remains. Particular around Hogwarts.”

Eriol nodded. “We’ll have to adapt a few spells, perhaps a ritual. Sakura, how much time do we have?”

She frowned. “It’s urgent that we return as soon as possible. But the feeling is strange as well. I think time passes differently in here.”

“We’ll go quickly then,” the half-reincarnation said, “but we won’t rush things. Why don’t you recharge yourself while my cute little descendant and I work through this?”

“Don’t kill each other,” Sakura ordered sternly as Syaoran glared at the other man with murder in his eyes. The wizards looked confused.


“You’re right,” Hermione said, frowning. “It’s almost like we were Confunded.”

“Do you know what happened to us?” Ginny asked the sorcerers suspiciously.

“We did nothing to you if that’s what you suspect,” Syaoran said sharply.

“If you were meant to remember,” Eriol said quietly, “then you would.”

And that was that.

Sakura moved away a few feet to give the two privacy to work, while assuring the group that it was nothing to worry about, when Eriol’s voice stopped her.

“You’ve been draining yourself quite a bit this week, haven’t you Sakura-chan?”

“O-only once or twice,” she stammered, wondering where he was taking this.

“What was it you dreamed?”

Syaoran looked up, eyes narrowed. That would explain why Sakura pushed herself so hard. She knew better than to exhaust her magic like that, and to do it repeatedly.

“A castle in ruins,” she said, eyes haunted and voice hollow. She should have known better than to dip into the current of fate. It took days, sometimes weeks, before she stopped dreaming the
future. “A lake red with the blood of hundreds. Fire and death in the streets of London, and a black cloud engulfing the countryside.”


Even Minerva, who was well-known for her dislike of Divination, looked shaken.

“I had to stop it before it came to that,” Sakura said.

Minerva thought back to her short time with the thoughtful, sweet girl and knew that there was no evil in her. Her apprehension, caused by the countless stories that placed sorcerers in a bad light, dissipated, and she stepped forward to hug the girl.

The four students gaped at the unusual display from their stern Head of House. They may have suspected this side of her existed, but they had rarely seen her like this.

“You saved my life at least twice, and because of you the Wizarding World did not fall. I am in your debt, Sakura,” she said quietly. “And yours,” she added looking up at Eriol and Syaoran.

Albus contemplated life without his deputy, and his heart lurched at the thought. He would give anything to keep her safe. He was resolved that whatever they needed, if it was within his power, they would have.

“We all are,” he said, eyes twinkling as she blushed a bright red.

With a flick of their wands, the two adults easily created enough chairs for everyone.

“I, um, have a question,” Hermione said hesitantly, half raising her hand.

“Yes?” Sakura asked with a friendly smile.

“Well, why are those two creating a means of escaping and not you as well?” She looked as though she expected Sakura to be angry, but the Japanese girl simply laughed.

“Syaoran has been trained for this almost since he was born,” she explained. “And Eriol has decades, maybe centuries, of experience with the intricacies of magic. I didn’t discover my power until I was nine, and my in-depth training didn’t really start until a few years later. Because I have so much magic, I generally power the spells when needed, like a battery.”

“Er…how old is Eriol?” Harry asked hesitantly.

Sakura hesitated. “Eriol is a special case. For all intents and purposes he’s 18, the same age as Syaoran and me. Technically, I believe he is about the same age as my father. His memories, though, come from a sorcerer who was centuries old when he passed away.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, fascinated by this insight into a magic that was vastly different from his own. “How is that possible?”

“He is the reincarnation – the half reincarnation – of an extremely famous and powerful sorcerer named Clow Reed,” she said. “Clow was the only sorcerer to combine eastern and western magic, and he created cards containing powerful spirits. He lived for several centuries until, I suppose, he grew tired of life. At that point he reincarnated himself in two people: Eriol and my father. However, Eriol received all of the memories and most of the magic, and it weighed on him. I managed to fix that eventually, though.”

“How long do you live?!” Ron asked incredulously, only to receive an elbow in the ribs from both
Hermione and Ginny.

The Card Mistress chuckled. “No one really knows what determines our life span. Magical power has something to do with it, but that is all we are sure about. Low-level sorcerers, about on the level of your Headmaster” – she nodded at him in acknowledgment – “rarely live beyond the normal human life span. Honestly, it varies.”

“How powerful are you?” Ginny asked curiously, and they all looked eager for the answer.

Sakura began looking rather nervous, and her eyes darted over to where Syaoran and Eriol were drawing complex symbols in the air. “I – er – we are all in the upper range, except Eriol isn’t at the moment since he gave half of his power to Tomoyo-chan to use since she didn’t have any and wanted to help, and we wanted her here, of course…” She became aware that she was babbling and stopped. “That is, the three of us are fairly powerful.”

She really didn’t want them to know she was more or less the most powerful sorceress in existence. The students were nervous enough as it was.

From the looks a few of them were giving her, particularly the professors, they knew she wasn’t saying everything, but they moved on.

“Well why didn’t you just kill Voldemort and his Death Eaters, then?” Ron asked belligerently, and winced when Hermione kicked his ankle.

“There are limits even to our power,” Sakura replied. “And Voldemort was tied to Potter-san in such a way that if anyone else killed him, Potter-san would die as well.” The Hogwarts contingent exchanged horrified glances.

“Besides,” Eriol interjected from where he had been eavesdropping, “magic doesn’t fix everything. Just look at us. Tomoyo’s obsessive-compulsive, Sakura’s dense, Touya’s overprotective, Kero’s a glutton, Syaoran’s overly hostile –”

“Die,” Syaoran growled.

“Eriol has an identity crisis,” Sakura interjected.

“Hell, he is an identity crisis,” Syaoran muttered.

Minerva was the only one who managed to follow most of what they were talking about. The others decided it was better not to ask.

There was one thing bothering Harry, though. “You mentioned that he, “he gestured to blue-haired sorcerer, “gave part of his magic to…Tomoyo?…but why would he need to do that?”

Syaoran sat down next to Sakura, who abandoned her chair to sit with him, leaning back and resting against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her waist with an absentminded intimacy.

He and Eriol had decided to take it in turns to develop the spell, so that they could look at it with fresh eyes.

Hermione and Ginny had to suppress an “awwww,” and even Minerva’s eyes softened at the scene.

“Because she doesn’t have any magic,” Syaoran stated as though it were obvious.

“Although she is so observant that it seems like magic at times,” his girlfriend admitted ruefully.

Everyone reacted with surprise, and even shock, at the revelation.
“You can do that?” Ginny breathed.

“With certain people,” Sakura nodded. “But the – what do you call them? – Muggle who has the ability to borrow magic safely is extremely rare.”

Hermione’s brilliant mind was obviously considering the implications of this information. “How do you interact with Muggles, then?” she asked. “When is it okay to tell them about magic? How do you handle the Muggles that find out about it? Can you all alter memories?” She trailed off, wincing inwardly at the Chinese boy’s expression.

Syaoran stiffened. “It is taboo among our people to mess with the minds of others, particularly those who have no protection against it. It is only permissible in life or death situations, and scant few others. If a sorcerer is foolish enough or careless enough to allow someone to witness them working magic, then it is not the innocent bystander who should be punished.”

Sakura lightly stroked his arm, and he calmed beneath her touch. “Most people think they’re imagining things, anyway,” she continued for Syaoran. “If it doesn’t fit into their worldview, their subconscious tends to explain it away.”

Minerva watched the ease with which the two interacted, their love for one another obvious, and she was forced to suppress a flash of jealousy. She wished, often, that Albus could love her in such a way. Glancing to the side, her eyes met his, and she couldn’t know that his thoughts mirrored hers.

“True,” Hermione agreed, looking thoughtful.

“What I would like to know,” Minerva said, forcing her attention back to the present, “is why you chose sneak and hide rather than make yourselves known.”

Dumbledore nodded and smiled fondly at his Deputy. “I admit to being curious as well,” he commented.

Syaoran and Sakura exchanged glances and looked over to where Eriol had just finished tracing out an elaborate glowing circle of occult symbols. “Your turn,” he said cheerfully, and the Li clan leader eased out from behind Sakura, while Eriol took Sakura’s chair.

“That part was your idea, so you explain,” Sakura stated.

He grinned that grin that made someone want to wring his neck. “Ah, well,” he said. “It was much simpler not having to go through a lot of red tape. We knew very little about wizards, you see, and we hadn’t the faintest idea how you would react. Particularly since you had magically isolated yourself centuries ago, and most magic users had forgotten your existence, as you had forgotten theirs.

“Also, people react more naturally when they don’t know they’re being observed,” he added.

Ron appeared to be examining Eriol closely. “Slytherin,” he pronounced at last. “Definitely Slytherin.”

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“Why, thank you,” the sorcerer replied, not in the least perturbed.

Hermione sighed at the insanity of it all, and barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes as Harry grinned faintly and Ginny snickered.

Minerva’s scrutiny fell upon the two friends who waited patiently for the next question. “Why are you answering our questions so freely?” she asked at last. “Surely you are not so trusting with
Sakura blinked in surprise, before replying. “You deserve to know about us as we have learned about you. And we are not imparting secrets; or at least, these things are well-known among most magical beings. The race of sorcerers are the caretakers of the world, and one of the last lines of defense, in a sense. When a problem or threat can no longer be dealt with, so that it spills over and affects other races who are not related to it, it is our duty to resolve that problem. That is why we are so powerful. Your magical creatures, at least, should know what we are, but it seems that living in the Wizarding World is causing them to forget.

“Your phoenix, for one,” she said to the Headmaster, “should never have attacked me. As such a powerful and intelligent creature of Light, a phoenix would never attack a sorcerer unless he or she had gone rogue. He should have remembered our race even if those creatures of the forest did not. The fact that he remembered too late, that I needed to remind him, is worrisome.”

“It seems that your magical isolation affects the magical creatures of your world as well as the witches and wizards,” Eriol commented with a slight frown.

Harry considered their words, his brow furrowed. “When you say ‘magical isolation’ do you mean more than the fact that the Wizarding World is hidden from non-magical eyes?” he asked at last.

Eriol nodded approvingly. “Yes, I do. I had a friend do a test on DNA samples we obtained from several different witches and wizards and we found that there is a certain magic bonded to the DNA that implied a spell had been cast over the wizarding race as a whole, quite a long time in the past.”

“I’ll explain later,” Hermione whispered to the Weasleys, who were looking quite blank at the information.

“We deduced that your isolation was reinforced by magic,” he continued. “It could be overcome or worked around, if one so chose, but the other races respected your right to decide your own fate. After a time, magic users forgot wizards existed, and wizards forgot that they were not the only ones who could wield magic; the spell facilitated this. Even now, our purely magical attacks have not killed a wizard unless there was an enormous amount of power behind it.”

“There are ways to get around it,” Syaoran commented darkly.

Ginny shivered at his tone.

“Hiiragizawa, Sakura, we’re ready. You may want to check it over.”

The two stood and motioned for the others to do the same. “Come,” Sakura said lightly. “I think it’s time to go back. You just need to stand in the circle.”

The wizards observed the glowing creation with interest. Although they did not know it, it was similar to the magical circles that appeared beneath Sakura and Eriol when they used their staves. The large group did not seem to stand on it, so much as it glowed in the darkness centimeters beneath their feet. Strange symbols and geometric lines cut through the glowing design. It aesthetically pleasing as well as complicated.

The Card Mistress glanced over it, and it looked fine to her. But then, she was no expert. “You added the extra person?” she asked.

“We tacked him on over there,” Syaoran said, waving vaguely. “He’ll be pulled along when we leave.”
“So no other wizards know about you?” Harry asked quietly as the two young men checked for accuracy one last time.

“Ano…well… there was one other person,” Sakura mumbled.

“Who?” Hermione questioned curiously as the others paused to listen.

“…Lupin-sensei.” Sakura hoped this wouldn’t get him into trouble. “I only revealed myself to him to break his curse, and that was just yesterday. I made him promise to keep me a secret until the battle was over.”

Harry, to his surprise as well as everyone else’s, hugged the sorceress. “Thank you,” he said. “It was hard to see someone like him suffer for something that wasn’t his fault.”

Dumbledore chuckled and said, “I should have known. We saw him transform right as the fight began and had no time for questions.”

“I have one last question,” Minerva said hesitantly before Sakura activated the spell. “I hope I don’t offend, but why send people who are so young to investigate an unknown society, particularly one in the middle of a war?”

This was, apparently, the right question. Sakura flinched and froze in place, Syaoran stiffened almost unnoticeably, and Eriol’s calm air seemed to shift slightly.

The butterflies began when Tomoyo was left alone. She had never been this nervous in any of her previous adventures with Sakura. But then, Sakura had always been there to protect her and their opponents hadn’t been killers. Now, she was alone, their last line of defense. Her friends didn’t really think anything too powerful or evil would make it past them, but it was always better to be prepared.

Shortly after Sakura, Syaoran, and Eriol left, the alarms went off. Taking a deep breath to calm herself and retain her composure, Tomoyo stepped out of the abandoned guest room. The halls were full as frightened children streamed by. The staircases all moved and froze in place, leading down below the dungeons to the secret catacombs. The caretaker, Argus Filch, led the way, while a few of the professors, including Snape, herded them along and guarded their backs.

Tomoyo let the vast majority go by before following near the end. Attack was more likely to come from the rear.

In the crowd she was rather inconspicuous, and Sakura had lent her a witch’s robe. With fear so prevalent, she would be virtually unseen unless she appeared to be a threat.

She lost track of how long they had been walking when the large group paused. Tomoyo stood on tiptoe, trying to see above the mass of heads in front of her, and managed to catch sight of a gigantic set of doors. She couldn’t make out who opened the doors or how, but at last the students began moving forward again. The doors were thicker than the entrance to the Great Hall, Tomoyo noted with approval. Flickering firelight illuminated a large stone chamber as heavy bolts slid into place. It looked as if it had been built to withstand a siege.

There was nothing they could do but wait. Nervous whispering filled the room with a hissing sound as small groups of friends formed.

The purple-haired girl slipped into the shadows against the wall. It took a moment for her to slip
into a meditative state, but remaining there was simple. Time seemed to disappear as she breathed slowly and steadily. At the edges of her senses she could feel the warm auras of her friends. Not wanting to alarm or distract them, Tomoyo simply felt them, comforted by their existence.

It might have been a moment or an eternity, but she was jolted back into full consciousness when Sakura, Syaoran, and Eriol seemed to disappear, along with a somewhat large portion of the forces that had been fighting outside of the castle.

Pushing away her worry, Tomoyo collected herself enough to sense that the Guardians were still here. She imagined that they were as concerned as she was, but they didn’t have the luxury to search. The young woman might have done so herself, had she known how to extend her senses far enough. Eriol had only gone over the basics, and she only had time to learn what he thought she would need, complexity mixed with simplicity.

She would trust them, Tomoyo decided. She would wait for them to return to her, because they would never abandon her for any reason. They would be fine.

Less than half an hour later she felt it. A wave of powerful and evil magic washed over her, nearly bringing her to her knees. Even the witches and wizards felt it, she noticed, as they shivered and looked around in confusion.

Something was coming. Tomoyo fisted her cloak and swallowed convulsively. Something powerful and very, very evil. Hesitantly she tried to feel what the creature was, and nearly gagged. It was like wading through sewage, thick and oozing, and as she pushed closer, she was overwhelmed with its desire to cause blood and pain and torture. To eat and drink of death and decay until it was bloated on the misery.

Oh Kami-sama, she thought, trembling from head to toe. I have to stop it, and I have no idea how. She needed to go up, needed to get to the top of the battlements to at least see what was coming and try to slow it down. But she couldn’t alarm the students.

Picking the first adult she saw who was in the shadows and out of the immediate view of the children, Tomoyo approached Severus Snape.

“I need to get to the battlements,” she told him quietly, without preamble. “I need to go up so that I can see what is happening.”

The Potions Master’s black eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Who are you?” he hissed. “What are you doing here?”

Her amethyst eyes bored into his as she spoke. “I am here to protect the children should anything get past the defenses. You can feel the thing coming, you must feel it. I’m the only one left who may be able to deal with it.”

He scowled, but Tomoyo caught a flicker of fear in his eyes and the barest hint of a shudder. He could feel it, whether or not he wanted to believe it, and he knew it was too powerful for them.

“The castle must be full of Death Eaters by now, girl,” he sneered. “And I do not trust you.”

“Not one of you knew I was here,” Tomoyo reminded him. “If I had wanted to, I could have killed any of you. You do not need to trust me, but you do need to take me up. Or do you not know the castle better than any interlopers?” She forced an amused smile, and it seemed to work.

They could not leave unnoticed through such large and heavy doors, but Professor Snape’s glare kept any from approaching or questioning as he slipped out with a purple-haired companion.
The journey up the flights of stairs was much longer than going down had been. Several groups of Death Eaters had slipped into the castle and were searching for inhabitants, itching to kill. Tomoyo completely lost any sense of direction as the tall wizard led her through a dizzying array of secret passages and hidden staircases. More often than not they were forced to circle around Death Eaters or hide in the nooks and crannies of the large stone castle. But Tomoyo was silent and inconspicuous, and Snape had learned early on how to move silently and avoid detection. In spite of several close calls, the pair made it out into the open several stories above ground.

They immediately noticed the creature and wished they hadn’t. It was larger than the giants, towering over Hogwarts. She had known whatever was coming was powerful, but she hadn’t thought it could be so gigantic. Horns curled over its forehead, and claws longer than Tomoyo was tall extended from hands and feet, as its fangs glinted in the light of the moon. Its body seemed to suck in all light, like a black hole, and although it was difficult to make out specific features, something looked very wrong, as if it had too many joints and its limbs seemed out of proportion with its body.

“Merlin,” Severus breathed, sickened by the very sight of the unnatural being. It seemed not even to notice the humans and beasts as it made its way to the castle. Human and creature of the forest, all screamed and fled from its path, a nightmare come to life. Whole swathes of living beings died beneath its feet.

Tomoyo opened her mouth to speak and her voice cracked. Trying again, “Evacuate the children.” She bit her lip. “I’ll try to slow that – that thing down, but you need to get them out of there.”

He nodded and ran. Now was not the time to argue.

Alone now, she wracked her brain for something, anything, that any of her friends might have mentioned, any clue to what this thing was and how to stop it. She noticed, with some relief, that Kero-chan was coming quickly, the other Guardians some ways behind him.

His expression frightened her. Kero – cheerful, optimistic Kero-chan – should never look like that.

“What is it?” she asked quietly as he leaned against her side to lend her some comfort.

“It’s a demon,” he replied. “This Dark Lord is insane. It’s been centuries since one was summoned. Even rogue sorcerers will never consider doing such a thing.”

“How do we stop it?” she asked, and she heard her voice as if from a great distance. Was she going into shock? Or was she so terrified that she was beyond fear?

For one awful moment Tomoyo thought he would say they couldn’t. And then he said, “We do whatever we can and hope we get lucky. It will take tremendous power. If we can defeat it, it will not be able to sustain itself in this dimension. If only we had some sort of artifact the demon hunters once used.”

Tomoyo gripped Kerberos’ golden fur as Yue, Ruby Moon, and Spinel Sun arrived, all looking weary and just a little frightened. “Zettai daijoubu da yo,” she whispered.

Why send people who are so young to investigate an unknown society, particularly one in the middle of a war?

The question hung in the air for a long moment before the sorcerers answered at last.
“We were the ones to discover the Wizarding World,” the Chinese boy said flatly, “so we took up responsibility to investigate. The less who knew about it the better, at least until we could sort things out.”

Dumbledore seemed not to notice the tone that said ‘drop it’ and asked, “Will you not get in trouble with your government or leaders?”

Sakura coughed lightly. “We are the future leaders of the sorcerers, if not leaders right now,” she said uncomfortably.

“But how can that be?” Hermione questioned, astonished. “You’re barely older than we are, and you must just be starting college.”

“No…well, Eriol’s background rather speaks for itself,” Sakura replied. “And Syaoran is the leader of the Li clan, the last true clan of sorcerers and the most prominent. And I’m…um…the most powerful sorcerer in existence.”

Even Dumbledore was hard-pressed not to gape, and Ron couldn’t refrain from choking. The amount of power they were speaking of was almost beyond anything a wizard or witch could imagine. Not to mention Sakura looked completely harmless and perhaps a little naïve.

“She mastered and upgraded the magic of Clow,” Eriol said, and the two sorcerers looked at her proudly. “One of her formal titles is Card Mistress.”

Sakura gave them a quick, nervous smile. “Surprise?” she said weakly.

“Fascinating,” murmured Albus once he had recovered. His respect for the three had, in fact, grown. “We simply must exchange tales when this is over.”

Minerva looked over her charges, all of whom appeared awed and apprehensive. She would need to have a talk with them, she decided. Remind them that they, like Harry, were still just people. Sakura looked unsure enough as it was. “I think we would all like that,” she said with a decisive nod.

Sakura smiled. “It would be our pleasure. And don’t worry, even among the sorcerers we’re rather unique.”

“Is everybody ready?” Eriol asked.

There was a round of assent.

“Right,” he said, and launched into a series of strange words. The glowing circle brightened, and they felt a sudden vertigo, as though they were falling though they hadn’t moved.

They closed their eyes and when they opened them, Harry and his friends found themselves in a room that was horribly familiar.

“Harry,” Ginny murmured sympathetically to the young wizard who was transfixed by the fluttering veil.

“The Department of Mysteries,” Ron stated blankly.

“Really,” Eriol said with faint interest, looking up from the unconscious body of the man they had dragged along. “So this is what was behind the doors. I was rather curious.”

“What,” Harry began, turning to face the enigmatic sorcerer. He choked and his face lost all color.
“Sirius!” he shouted, and knelt by the careworn man.

“So you know him?” Erion began when Sakura interrupted him. The moment they returned to reality, the itching feeling that they needed to return quickly had transformed into a full blown roar that resounded in her very bones. She could hardly keep still, so powerful was the feeling.

“Erion, we need to go,” she said frantically. “We need to go now.”

Neither Erion nor Syaoran had ever heard her so desperate and panicked. With a strength that surprised many, Li slung the unconscious and battered man over his shoulder and turned to the wizards.

“Quickly,” he said. “Show us the way out.”

Sakura’s panic was catching, and they ran out of the bare chamber and entered a room full of tables and shelves littered with strange objects. Erion, near the middle of the line, paused at the sight of a golden torc and swiped it, quietly exclaiming, “So this is where that went.” He noticed Hermione’s scandalized look and Sakura’s questioning one. “I’ve been looking for that for centuries,” he explained briefly.

In a round, spinning room with several doors, they ran into two of the Aurors young and inexperienced enough that they had been left behind to guard the Ministry building. The Aurors stopped, shocked by the sight the group presented.

“Here,” Syaoran said, unceremoniously dumping Sirius into their arms as he ran past, ignoring Harry’s outraged expression.

“Wh-what?” one of the guards stuttered incoherently.

“Take him to St. Mungo’s immediately, and watch over him,” Albus ordered, losing the dotty grandfather act and reminding them that he was considered one of the greatest wizards of the time. With no time for social niceties, he didn’t hesitate to search their minds for any indication that they would harm Sirius or conveniently “forget” that he had been proven innocent posthumously.

Sirius had just begun to stir when Albus decided that they would do as he said, and left the injured wizard in the Aurors’ hands.

Minerva had continued when the Headmaster paused, and she led the group to the Apparition area. He caught up only a moment later.

“Can you follow us when we Apparate?” he asked the sorcerers.

“You lead and we’ll follow,” Syaoran agreed.

Dumbledore turned to his students. “You will Apparate, but let me guide you.”

They nodded, faces grim.

“Ready?” He grabbed Minerva’s arm in his left and Harry’s with his right, waiting a moment until they were all connected. “Apparate.”

The Hogwarts group turned on the spot and disappeared with a pop, Sakura, Erion, and Syaoran following silently. They reappeared between the lake and the forest with a clear view of the castle.

“Merlin!” Dumbledore swore, stunned. The others couldn’t believe what was happening, and Minerva was too stunned to even speak, though tears glimmered in her green eyes. “The
children,” she choked out at last, and turned to lay her head on Albus’ shoulder, shaking with sorrow.

“Draco,” Ginny gasped, and Hermione burst into tears.

“He was helpless,” Ron muttered angrily, face ashen.

“They all were,” Harry said quietly.

“Iiieee!!!” Sakura screamed as the demon demolished the castle with little effort, reducing the proud building to a pile of rubble and crushed bodies. “Tomoyo-chan!” she shrieked hysterically as Syaoran held back her wildly struggling form. “Tomoyo-chan!”

“She’s gone, Sakura,” Syaoran whispered softly, a lump in his throat.

She slumped in his arms, crying unashamedly. Then pain stabbed through her body, and she arched her back with a tortured cry before collapsing to the ground. Her sight was blurred by more than tears as she gasped for breath.

Syaoran crouched by her side, calling her name frantically. The others stood back to give them room, and Hermione babbled a string of questions, more than unnerved by the events that had occurred in such a short time.

Eriol’s eyes narrowed as he glanced between Sakura and the castle and back again. “You tied yourself to the castle, didn’t you Sakura?” he asked, and there was an edge of panic in his voice that none had ever heard before.

“Acci – ident,” she whimpered, teeth clenched as the destruction of the castle ignited her own. With a last cry she threw herself into visions of an alternate present, searching desperately for a different, better, outcome as her magic drained away.

The sorcerers knew instantly what she was attempting.

Syaoran reached out for her, hand glowing green, when Eriol caught his wrist. “You need to save your magic, Syaoran,” he said seriously. “You are the only one who can help me send that,” he tilted his head toward the demon, “back to where it belongs.”

Reluctantly he drew his magic back inside himself. “Sakura need help,” he hissed, not quite ready to give in.

Eriol turned to the wizards and witches, Syaoran following suit a moment later from where he knelt on the ground.

“We would not ask this if the need were not dire,” the Li clan leader stated formally. “Will you lend Sakura your magic?”

“What is she doing?” Minerva asked softly.

Eriol gazed sadly upon the still figure. “She is searching for an alternate present, one where the destruction of the castle did not or has not yet occurred. It drains her quickly; without help she may not have the magic to repair this reality.”

“There is a risk,” Syaoran continued. “Should she die before returning your magic, you will lose it forever.” He bowed low, as gracefully as he could from his position on the forest floor. “Please
Dumbledore stepped forward. “All of you came to help our world, at great risk to yourselves. Even now she tries to save us, as she saved Minerva and Harry.”

“She saved my best mate,” Ron added simply.

The sorcerers gazed upon the small group and saw their unanimous consent.

“What do we do?” Hermione asked with the faintest of smiles.

Syaoran swallowed hard before nodding. “Just will your magic to her,” he said, forcing himself not to rush ahead heedlessly as he felt Sakura’s magic drawing ever closer to critical levels.

“We’ll do the rest,” Eriol finished.

There was a moment of silence but for screams in the distance, and then the area began to glow. For the first time the wizards saw their pure, raw magic, as glowing silver cords flowed toward the prone figure on the ground.

Sakura wrenched herself out of her current vision and into more distant ones, presents that were more and more unlike her own. Again and again she saw the castle crumble, watched Tomoyo die and the young students crushed by large slabs of stone, buried alive in the earth. Sometimes the group arrived even later, sometimes the Dark Army won even without their Lord, and sometimes the wizards and witches in her group all died as well. Twice, she had seen a reality in which all had been killed but for Eriol, Syaoran, and herself.

Not good enough, not nearly good enough, she thought, willing herself onward though the way grew more difficult as she burned through her magic.

All of a sudden Sakura felt a rush of strength, familiar despite a pervading sense of ‘foreignness’. She could use this. It was used up more quickly than her own power, but she was getting closer to what she wanted, the events tempered, not quite so catastrophic. Not perfect, but workable.

Syaoran watched Sakura weaken and gripped her limp hand tightly in his own. “Just choose Sakura,” he cried out desperately. “Settle for something please. We’ll make it work. I promise.”

She heard him distantly, his words at the very edge of her awareness, but she pushed that recognition aside.

So close, she thought, gritting her teeth. Almost…there… With the last shred of her magic she snatched the vision and slammed it into reality.

The spell that dulled Sakura’s reactions to the brutality of warfare evaporated, and the weight of those horrific memories crashed down upon her weakened self. The strain of the past week, compounded by the events of that night, fragmented her mind. The abrupt loss of the shield around her mind shattered it.

The world around the motley group rippled, and there was a long moment of disorientation before the world corrected itself. The first thing any of the wizards noticed was that the emptiness where their magic had once resided was filled again. The flashes of spell fire drew their attention to where Hogwarts stood whole and proud. A rush of evil – of an all-consuming wrongness – and the demon appeared slowly, piece by piece, on the battlefield.

“Sakura?” her boyfriend said cautiously, attempting to shake her awake. Her skin looked almost gray from exhaustion and it seemed as though she barely breathed.
Filled with a deep sense of foreboding, he reached lightly for her mind, and then threw himself into the search. Sakura! he shouted mentally, and found nothing. Her body lived, but her very self, everything that made her Sakura, was gone. The Seers had said the Card Mistress would live for a long time; they said nothing of her sanity.

“Syaoran, we can’t wait.” Eriol’s clinical tone interrupted his despairing reverie. “The Headmaster and the others will watch over her.”

The volatile young man glared up at him, cradling Sakura’s body. “I won’t leave her,” he said coldly.

Minerva bit her lip, aching to do something, anything, to make this better, and saw Hermione turn away, unable to bear the raw intensity of their grief.

“You will let her sacrifice be in vain?” Eriol demanded. “You will waste what she has given us?”

Syaoran’s face contorted with fury as he covered Sakura with his cloak before standing and stepping toward the other sorcerer. Ron would have bet that he was about to punch the man, but he didn’t.

“What’s your plan?” he growled.

“If you give me your magic, will you be able to handle the army?” Eriol asked.

It seemed to the wizards that Syaoran drew his katana from nowhere. “Of course,” he said and paused. “If she dies,” he hissed, “I will kill you.”

No one who heard doubted the threat, but Eriol simply smiled and inclined his head. Syaoran flashed a brilliant green, before the light coalesced around his companion and faded.

The relationship between the two sorcerers confused Harry, and, he suspected, the others as well. He couldn’t decide whether the two were friends or enemies. The murderous tone in the Li’s voice was certainly genuine enough, and yet he had hardly hesitated to give up his magic.

And then there was Sakura. Harry heaved a melancholy sigh. He had only known the girl for a very short time, and yet he had felt there was something special about her. He had a feeling nothing would ever be the same if she didn’t recover. Certainly her friends would never recover from the blow.

“Come,” Eriol said, and Harry wondered where the long staff hovering in midair had come from. The strange Englishman mounted it side-saddle and waited for Syaoran to crouch on the handle behind him, perfectly balanced.

Ron stared enviously at such skill on a broom-like object.

“Watch over her,” Syaoran said, and then the two were airborne and speeding toward the castle as the demon fully materialized in their world.

They were several meters from the castle walls when Syaoran leaped from the staff. He fell, leg fully extended, heel leading. With a boom, he impacted with a troll, directly between the eyes. Even from their distance, Minerva could tell that the neck had broken.

Blade flashing, limbs lashing out, he mowed down all opponents in a storm of fury.

“He’s like a master,” Hermione murmured in awe as he performed a complicated series of acrobatics to dodge and then attack.
The purebloods had never seen anything like it. Magical ability was generally priced over physical.

Meanwhile, Eriol joined Tomoyo on top of the castle walls. Pale to the point of whiteness, she gave him a tremulous smile, relieved to have experienced and powerful help.

He sent the Guardians to continue taking out the army with Syaoran. Weakened as they were, he wouldn’t risk them with the demon.

“Do you need your magic back?” she asked softly, voice steady despite her fear.

“I shall be honest with you, Daidouji-san,” he said calmly, eyes never leaving the approaching horror. “It would be easier if I had another body to help. If you would prefer, however, I can certainly take care of this alone and you can assist the professors in evacuating the students.”

Tomoyo straightened, holding her head high. “The professors have the students well in hand. I shall help,” she said calmly. “If you show me what to do.”

“All right then,” he said, watching the demon draw ever closer. His smile held very little humor or sensibility. “Follow me.”

Two glowing balls of light, one purple and one blue-green, zipped around the enormous creature, flicking around limbs and torso, somehow holding it in place.

“I ought to be helping,” Harry muttered, feeling helpless and irritable. This was his world. At the very least he should be fighting to protect it.

“Don’t be ridiculous Harry,” Hermione admonished sharply. “You’re still weak from your near-death experience, and you’ve done your job besides. No one can ask more of you.”

“Besides,” Ginny added, “we need to protect Sakura.”

They glanced at her body, where McGonagall sat with the girl’s head in her lap, and sighed as the sight both saddened and made them feel guilty. The fierce light of joy and wild hope in Harry’s green eyes since Sirius had been rescued dimmed as he examined his godfather’s rescuer. “We shouldn’t have just left Padfoot like that,” he said anxiously. “What if he wakes up before we get back to him? What if they aren’t taking care of him?”

“Someone’s coming,” Minerva hissed, interrupting his string of worries as her sharp hearing picking up the sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs.

Immediately they drew their wands, magic none the worse for having lent it to the sorceress.

The two men who came into view so shocked Minerva that she nearly dropped her wand.

“Who are you?” Albus demanded stepping between the strangers and Minerva and his charge.

The older man paused and regarded them with a friendly smile while his companion’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I am Fujitaka Kinomoto, and this is my son, Touya. We are looking for – ”

“Sakura!” Touya exclaimed, all color draining from his face as he rushed toward her.

“You are her father?” Dumbledore asked.

“I am,” he replied, concern shining in his eyes.
The wizard glanced at his Deputy for confirmation and she nodded.

“How did you find us?” he queried curiously as he stored his wand away, making certain it was close at hand.

“Kaijuu, if you die on us, I’ll kill you myself,” was Touya’s near-hysterical contribution as the four students watched with varying degrees of sympathy.

Sorrow and worry clear in every line of his body, Fujitaka looked past the Headmaster to where Touya knelt beside his sister. “My wife,” he replied. “Nadeshiko.” And his smile this time was affectionate. “She died when Sakura was still young, but she watches over our children. She told us something was wrong and led us here.” A flash of pain again, in his eyes, and he could restrain himself no longer from his daughter’s side.

“She is a ghost?” Minerva asked, confused, as she gently handed his daughter to him. The group stood at a respectful distance from the family.

The archaeologist shook his head absently. “She has moved on, but her spirit watches over and protects us.”

“Where’s that gaki?” Touya demanded suddenly. “How dare he just abandon Sakura!”

“He means Li-san,” Fujitaka clarified at their confused looks while he tenderly stroked Sakura’s hair. “And where are Hiiragizawa-san and Tomoyo-san?” he asked, looking around. “Even Keroberos is missing.”

“I do not know who Keroberos is, but the others are in that chaos.” The elderly wizard nodded toward the raging battle. “We could not have fought so effectively, and so were charged with guarding your daughter. Even then, Syaoran Li needed to be forced to leave Sakura’s side,” he explained.

“We will protect Sakura now…”

“Pardon my rudeness,” said Dumbledore, realizing that he had forgotten to give the men their names. “I am Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, and this is my Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. You may know her better as Tabby.”

“Ah,” said the elder Kinomoto with an expression of enlightenment.

“And these are our students, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Ginevra Weasley,” he said, indicating each individual.

Fujitaka bowed slightly in greeting from where he sat and continued. “We will protect Sakura now, Dumbledore-san. And any of your students if you wish. I believe you may wish to fetch the young children who are evacuating the castle.”

Minerva and Albus exchanged a startled glance and turned to look towards Hogwarts. The demon was screeching and straining against the lights that held it, and they seemed to grow dimmer with the effort. The evacuation route would take the children to the very edge of the lake, beneath the cliff, and it was not at all visible from where they stood.

The group of wizards and witches turned to look at Sakura’s father, who was merely watching them with an easygoing expression.

“Right,” said McGonagall sharply. “Professor Dumbledore and I will find the evacuees. You four
stay here and keep an eye out. You are still weak from battle.” The four Gryffindors might have protested, but one did not argue when the Transfiguration Professor looked like that.

It took some time, but the professors managed to lead the young students to their safe area in small groups.

Tomoyo slammed her power into the demon’s side. It paused, but more from irritation and confusion than pain. Had she had a body at the moment, she might have been panting from effort. As it was, the purple globe of light that she had become was flickering and growing dim.

Again, Eriol said faintly, and Tomoyo could feel him concentrating almost all of his attention on chanting in tongues.

She gathered everything she had, every last hint of magic that Eriol had given her, and gathered it together until the glow was nearly blinding. She didn’t scream, didn’t cry out in defiance. Tomoyo simply used the last of her strength to slam the demon with her considerable borrowed power.

The abomination screeched in surprise, and perhaps some pain. Attention certainly caught now, it leaned down towards her.

Eriol took advantage of the position and zipped by the demon’s neck almost faster than the eye could follow, and the golden torc appeared around its throat, impossibly large.

It screamed horribly and clawed at the golden collar. If Eriol had had a body his ears would be bleeding. As it was, he ignored it and shouted a terrible word of power.

The demon simply blinked out of existence, returned once more to its own realm, and the golden torc dissolved.

Witnesses might have been disappointed at the anticlimactic way in which it had been banished, had they not been so relieved that the thing was gone.

Eriol was simply relieved that whatever the wizards had done to the torc had not completely destroyed the potent magic built into it. When he reappeared on top of the castle, stumbling with exhaustion, he smiled to see Tomoyo curled against Kerberos’ furry side, out cold.

The golden Guardian examined him and gestured with his head. “Get over here,” he said gruffly.

Eriol nearly collapsed against his old friend, pillowed by large white wings. Kero would protect them.

Between the death of the Dark Lord, the banishing of their all-powerful demon, and the massacre by the furious, sword-wielding boy, the Dark Lord’s army lost heart and were quickly captured.

Over the next few days, the government began the cleanup of the British Wizarding World that would take months to complete. Newspapers around the world detailed the defeat of You-Know-Who and his army by the Boy-Who-Lived and his friends. Using the full extent of their influence and power, Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter managed to keep any mention of the Sakura and her friends out of the media, but they could do little about the rumors. Too many had been saved by one or another of the mysterious strangers with their unknown magic, and the four Guardians hadn’t been all that inconspicuous.
Still, while people loved to gossip, very few actually believed all that they heard. Theories cropped up, some extremely unlikely, and some simply explaining the strangeness away with knowing nods and discussions of experimental magic or the disorientation that could crop up in the heat of battle.

Through the awards, the celebrations, the jubilation, Sakura remained unconscious in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. Syaoran refused to leave her side, often sleeping in the chair by her bed. More often than not, Madame Pomfrey or Professor McGonagall ended up transfiguring the chair into something more comfortable. Touya might have done the same, had his father not forced him to at least stretch his legs once in a while.

Eriol had encouraged Tomoyo to keep his magic until she was away from the Wizarding World. On those rare occasions when the sorcerers left the Hospital Wing, they used their magic to remain inconspicuous. Those few wizards who knew the truth spent much of their free time learning about the culture and the sorcerers’ abilities. Learning that sorcery at its most basic was simply willing something to happen, and having the power to back it up had been eye-opening.

Much of their energy, however, was concentrated on coaxing Sakura back to them. They spoke with her softly, out loud or mind to mind, and gently encouraged her body to soak in small pulses of their magic, in an attempt to jumpstart her natural recovery. A full day later, they could breathe easier; her mind had returned and she was sleeping at last.

She woke the second day.

Sakura frowned as she struggled out of the depths of unconsciousness. This isn’t my room, she thought immediately, and the worry forced her eyes open. She flinched at the brightness of the setting sun pouring through the windows, and moaned when she attempted to sit up and discovered the throbbing ache of her body. Her hands and arms, she noticed, were lightly bandaged, and she found a band-aid on her cheek when she examined her face. Her chest was tender as well, and she wouldn’t be surprised to find a large bruise.

A matronly woman bustled into her…curtained off area?… and clucked lightly. “You’re still recovering Miss Kinomoto,” she scolded gently in English. “Don’t try to get up yet.”

“Excuse me,” Sakura said quietly, surprised by how quickly the English came to her. “But, where am I? And who are you? What happened?”

Worry flitted over the stranger’s face before she said, “I am Madam Pomfrey, and you are currently in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts?” Sakura repeated, puzzled. “What is ‘Hogwarts’? What happened to me?”

A strange noise reached her ears and she turned her head to see Syaoran sitting in a chair, staring at her intensely as he gripped the armrests tightly. “Sa-ku-ra,” he said as if each syllable was wrenched from his throat.

“Syaoran?” she asked, both delighted and concerned.

“You know who I am,” he sighed and slumped in his chair, tension released so abruptly that he seemed almost boneless. In spite of herself, Poppy Pomfrey was touched and slightly shaken by the sheer depth of the relief she saw in the boy’s dark brown eyes.

“Of course I do,” Sakura said, frightened. Her head shot up to see Eriol, Tomoyo, and her family enter, along with an elderly man with a long silver beard and bright robes, and an older woman
wearing square spectacles and dark green robes.

“You do not remember what happened, Sakura-chan?” Eriol questioned soothingly, as if calming a skittish animal.

“Should I?” she asked, voice high-pitched with worry.

“I thought you were recovering rather too quickly,” he murmured to himself.

“Sakura,” her father said gently, coming to sit on her bed and gently brushing her bangs away from her eyes. “What is the last thing you remember?”

Sakura frowned in concentration. “I was working – at the restaurant – and on my way home. It was getting late, and then…I came home? I don’t understand. I was near the park. Did I make it home? What h-happened?”

“Calm down, Kaijuu,” Touya said. “You got home just fine. You’re about a week and a half behind the times.”

She took a deep breath to calm herself, and another. “I’m sorry,” she said to the two strangers. “I’m Sakura Kinomoto.” Her smile faltered at the couple’s expressions.


“And I am Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” the man said with a friendly, if somewhat subdued, smile.

“Witchcraft and wizardry?” Sakura repeated eyes wide. “Really?”

“Will she regain her memory?” Syaoran inserted shortly.

It was Eriol who responded. “I should think so, eventually,” he replied. “In the meantime, it may be beneficial to explain a few things to her.”

“I’ll do that,” Tomoyo offered softly.

The others left to give the girls privacy to speak.

Sakura sighed, leaning against the rail in the Astronomy Tower as she looked out over the grounds. The grass survived in patches, some gouged up or trampled, some stained the rusty color of dried blood. The waters of the lake were streaked brown. Large sections of the forest were blackened by fire. The gray sky seemed to reflect the general mood of the castle as smoke from the large funeral pyre drifted from the other side of Hogwarts grounds. Even now they recovered bodies.

She fingered the thin white scar on her cheek. By all rights she should have been curious as to the origin. She would have asked questions, searched out answers. It was as if a part of her knew that she didn’t want those answers, not really. In the two days since she had awoken, Sakura felt no trace of curiosity, and she knew that should have worried her. But it didn’t.

“Here you are,” said a soft voice.

“I’m sorry,” Sakura said, turning to face the Transfiguration Professor. “I should remember you. I
should remember everything. I’m sorry.”

“Child,” she said sympathetically, cupping the girl’s face in a gentle hand. “You have nothing to apologize for. You saved us, saved our world, we who were nothing to you, had done nothing for you.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Sakura said. “The only thing I could do.”

“Don’t forget to eat,” Minerva said, her arm dropping to her side. “Everyone is worried about you.”

“McGonagall-sensei,” the Card Mistress said hesitantly.

The woman paused at the door.

“Are you and the Headmaster…ano…married?”

The witch froze and Sakura wished she had not spoken. The question had seemed important to her, for some reason.

“We are not – he does not care for me in such a…fashion,” Minerva said haltingly, and quietly closed the door.

Eriol appeared in a corner of the room after the Professor had left. “Sakura-chan,” he said.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “Why do I not remember?”

“Do you want to?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, then, “No. I don’t know. I’m being selfish. My amnesia hurts everyone.”

“My dear Sakura,” he said with a light chuckle. “We all need to be selfish once in a while. You give too much of yourself sometimes. But you will need to remember, eventually. You must work things through.”

Sakura was silent for a long while, staring into space as Eriol kept her company. “I want to remember,” she said at last, a glint of determination in her eye. “It will be awful and heartbreaking and nightmarish, but they’re my memories, they’re me, and I need them.”

She toppled forward into Eriol’s arms.

“A little early,” he murmured to himself as he headed towards the Hospital Wing with his unconscious burden. “But this will give her another day to recover before the Minister arrives.”

And he smiled his trademark knowing smile, one that Syaoran had seen upon the Headmaster while Sakura was recovering.

“Kami-sama,” the Chinese sorcerer had muttered with great misery. “There are two of them.”

After a night full of nightmares Sakura and Syaoran soaked in the sunlight in the restored inner courtyard of Hogwarts. Her older brother and father had jobs back home, and it had taken Sakura several hours to convince them to return to Japan, that she was alright to stay for a few more days. And then she would be home among family.

Tomoyo, Eriol, and the Guardians were relaxing in other parts of the castle, taking a well-deserved break. The professors had been run ragged dealing with the aftermath of the final battle.
The loss of three of their older students, in addition to Filius Flitwick and Alastor Moody had hit them hard.

Harry was with Sirius and Remus, having hardly been able to pull himself away from his newly resurrected godfather. The ex-convict had been released a day before Sakura had woken up, and Harry and Remus had spent the time before alternating shifts between Sirius and the girl who had done so much for them. Draco had also awoken, at last, and Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had taken it upon themselves to recount what had happened to the confused Slytherin.

Sakura was at peace for the first time in a long time and she cherished this moment with the one she loved most. They deserved it, she thought, after the week they had had.

“I’m glad you remember,” Syaoran said quietly as a breeze tugged gently at their hair.

“Are you?” she asked thoughtfully.

“I wish the memories did not cause you pain or nightmares,” he said. “But they are a part of who you are, and it would be terrible to lose yourself.”

“There was so much blood, Syaoran,” she whispered, a haunted look in her eyes. “So much blood. And the screaming…. ” She stared down at her hands and clenched them into fists. “I killed people.”

“I know,” he said quietly, pulling her close to him. “I know.”

Sakura listened to his heartbeat as a tear slipped from her emerald eyes. “I didn’t think I would be capable,” she said. “But I killed living, breathing, thinking…. ” She trailed off and shuddered. “I feel vile, dirty.”

“You’re not, love. You did what you had to do to protect yourself and others. They didn’t give you a choice.”

“I don’t want to think about this,” Sakura said decisively, sitting up and looking down at him.

“Then don’t,” he replied. “You’ll need to work through this eventually, but nothing says that it must be done all at once or now. It may be better to wait until you are at home, among your family.”

Sakura sighed and clambered to her feet, reaching down to pull Syaoran up. “When does the Minister arrive?”

“Tomorrow after lunch,” he replied.

“You must have seen him when you were in the Ministry, didn’t you? What’s he like?” Sakura asked.

Syaoran scowled. “I saw him once or twice. He was a weak man, physically and mentally, and that is what makes him dangerous.”

“What do you mean?” she queried, disturbed.

“To give power to someone who is concerned with himself and what makes him look good, rather than one who intends to protect the people, is always dangerous. If he doesn’t want to believe something, then he won’t, regardless of how it will affect those whose wellbeing he should look out for. If he feels threatened by us, he will retaliate in whatever manner possible, and as Minister he has many options available to him. At the very least, he will splash our pictures across his
paper.”

“So we may need to…” Sakura trailed off.

“Hai,” Syaoran said with a sharp nod.

“I don’t want them to fear us or worship us, Syaoran. It won’t be good for us, and it certainly won’t be good for them,” she said softly. “I want equality.”

“That will take time and effort,” he replied. “It may take longer than your lifetime to remove the stain the wizards place upon the race of sorcerers. To say nothing of how insular the society is, how prejudiced they became.”

“It will take as long as it takes. To do what is best for everyone, we need to build a ‘bridge between peoples’,” she stated firmly.

Syaoran regarded her with raised eyebrows. “Ah,” he said. “So that is what the prophecy referred to.”

“I think so,” she agreed.

“A world-wide memory erasure, then,” he said.

“Hai,” she whispered. “Unless the Minister proves us wrong.”

Syaoran snorted. Before he could comment, Sakura changed the subject, having spied Minerva and Albus walking down the corridor that surrounded the courtyard, the wall only waist height, allowing them to gaze across the lawn and flowers that surrounded a small pond.

“I feel guilty,” Sakura murmured quietly so that the couple couldn’t overhear. “When I had amnesia, I asked Tabby-chan if she was married to the Headmaster. She looked so upset…”

Syaoran blinked, and peered more closely at the wizard and witch.

“You and Tomoyo are thinking about playing matchmaker, aren’t you?” he asked wryly and sighed. “Girls,” he muttered, but his chocolate brown eyes were soft with affection as he gazed upon the young woman he loved.

Sakura huffed, and hit him lightly on the shoulder. “What are you going to do about it, then?” she said challengingly.

His eyes glinted with mischief, and then he grabbed her by the waist and swung her around. She shrieked with laughter, drawing the attention of the two professors.

Albus and Minerva paused and watched the sorcerers. Their love was almost palpable, the witch thought, as Sakura rested her forehead against Syaoran’s, and brown eyes stared into green.

Minerva was happy for them. They needed laughter and love at a time like this, in the aftermath of war.

She sighed and watched the couple, tilting her head to the side, almost but not quite leaning on Albus’ shoulder. Albus looked down at his companion, longing and relief evident in his eyes, his hand almost but not quite touching hers.

Minerva looked up at him, too late to see evidence of his true feelings, and said with a shaky voice, “Albus?”
He immediately grew concerned and leaned closer to her. “Yes, my dear?”

Her courage deserted her and she sighed again as she looked away. “Nothing.” she said and wistfully watched the two sorcerers she had come to care for.

“That was sweet of you,” Sakura commented with a smile, and kissed him briefly on the lips.

He valiantly attempted to suppress his blush as he said gruffly, “What was? And I’m not sweet.”

“Helping us,” she replied. “Aishiteru.”

“Hello,” said cheerful two voices in stereo.

Sakura turned, Syaoran’s arms still around her waist, and blinked. For a moment she thought she saw double, before realizing she was looking at a pair of red-headed twins.

“So you’re the mysterious, all-powerful heroes,” one observed.

“We’ve been ever so interested in meeting you,” said the other.

“Quite, oh brother of mine.”

“Indeed, my handsome twin.”

“Fred – ”

“ – and George – ”

“ – Weasley, at your service,” they finished in stereo, bowing comically.

Sakura giggled, and even Syaoran seemed a little more at ease.

“We happened to be passing by, when we saw you tormenting our esteemed Headmaster and lovely Deputy Headmistress,” Fred said with a teasing grin.

“A valiant effort, I’m sure,” added George.

“Anyway – ”

“ – we thought you might wish to add your name to the betting pool.”

“You have a betting pool?” Syaoran questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, if you wanted to get technical, the school has a betting pool.”

“It came with the territory,” said Fred.

“But how does that work?” Sakura asked, puzzled.

“Well, the betting began in the late 1960’s. There’s quite a pot for the winner,” George answered.

“I don’t think anyone imagined Dumbledore and McGonagall could spend quite so many decades in denial,” his twin added dryly.
The four turned to look at the professors, who gazed back with arched eyebrows.

“It wouldn’t be fair for me to bet if I’m trying to get them together,” Sakura declined politely. “But thank you.”

Later that night the sorcerers took an early dinner to avoid the crowd. Sakura and Tomoyo sat across from Eriol and Syaoran on the end of the Gryffindor table, with Harry and his friends providing a welcome buffer against the curious students of their House.

Sakura sighed, leaning her head against Tomoyo’s shoulder and looking up at her.

“They remind me of how you and Syaoran were,” Tomoyo commented, nodding her head toward the Head Table.

Sakura shifted her gaze to watch as Albus leaned toward Minerva, absently brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes and tucking it behind her ear. When he realized what he’d done, he blushed red beneath his beard. Minerva stared at her plate, picking at her food as two bright spots of color appeared on her cheeks.

“It requires more effort to get Syaoran to turn tomato-red these days,” Tomoyo sighed, bringing a hand to her cheek in distress.

“Poor Syaoran,” Sakura said, looking up at Tomoyo mock sternly. “Not only is he under attack by Oniichan and Kero-chan, you and Eriol-kun insist on tormenting him.”

“Ho ho ho,” her cousin laughed. “Back on topic, I spoke with the Headmaster while you were recovering, and I believe something will be done eventually.”

“Even if Eriol needs to put his strings to use again?” the Card Mistress questioned, a faint thread of amusement running through her voice as she picked her head up.

“If it comes to that,” Tomoyo said innocently enough, but there was a cunning gleam in her eye.

Minerva followed Albus into his sitting room and closed the door behind them. This was the first time in days they’d been able to simply relax in each other’s company, and she missed it.

Albus surprised her by drawing her to him and holding her close, resting his chin on her head as she leaned against his chest. In the chaos of dealing with captives, planning funerals, and informing remaining family members of deceased, they had not had any time to themselves, and he had never dealt with how close he had come to losing her. The nightmares caught him in their grip every night, as he replayed the scene over and over in his dreams. Only this time Sakura had never appeared. Sprays of blood as Voldemort slit her throat, her death throes as he plunged the poisoned blade into her heart. He screamed himself awake, sweaty and shaking, and only Fawkes could calm him.

Minerva closed her eyes, perfectly content to wait for Albus to gather his thoughts. She felt safe here with his arms wrapped around her waist as she listened to his heartbeat. She was, therefore, shocked to realize that he was weeping.

“Albus?” she murmured, leaning back to see him more clearly. It frightened her, how his cheeks were wet with tears and yet he made hardly any sound. “Albus, it’s all right,” she said gently, not knowing what else to say as she cradled his head in her hands. “Everything is fine.”

“You could have died,” he said at last, tears spent. “I could do nothing. If Sakura had not been

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Albus surprised her by drawing her to him and holding her close, resting his chin on her head as she leaned against his chest. In the chaos of dealing with captives, planning funerals, and informing remaining family members of deceased, they had not had any time to themselves, and he had never dealt with how close he had come to losing her. The nightmares caught him in their grip every night, as he replayed the scene over and over in his dreams. Only this time Sakura had never appeared. Sprays of blood as Voldemort slit her throat, her death throes as he plunged the poisoned blade into her heart. He screamed himself awake, sweaty and shaking, and only Fawkes could calm him.

Minerva closed her eyes, perfectly content to wait for Albus to gather his thoughts. She felt safe here with his arms wrapped around her waist as she listened to his heartbeat. She was, therefore, shocked to realize that he was weeping.

“Albus?” she murmured, leaning back to see him more clearly. It frightened her, how his cheeks were wet with tears and yet he made hardly any sound. “Albus, it’s all right,” she said gently, not knowing what else to say as she cradled his head in her hands. “Everything is fine.”

“You could have died,” he said at last, tears spent. “I could do nothing. If Sakura had not been
there…if she had never become involved….”

“But she was,” Minerva said firmly. “I am here and we are both fine.”

“There is something I should tell you,” he said at last, and if her eyes were not mistaking her, he appeared nervous. Albus gave a watery chuckle. “I daresay it oughtn’t to have taken decades, your near death, and a determined and devious young woman for me to do so. I don’t remember the last time I was called a coward.” Noticing her indignant expression on his behalf, he added, “She was very polite about it.”

He took a deep breath, his determination wavering as he struggled to express the secret he had spent decades protecting. Minerva had been his closest friend for years. Surely she wouldn’t let a confession of love ruin that. Nothing needed to change, and she deserved to know. If she had died before he could tell her, he would forever regret it.

What had seemed to be solid arguments when faced with Tomoyo Daidouji now appeared to be such a great risk.

Albus took a deep breath. “I love you.” And because she may assume it to be platonic, he added, “I am in love with you.”

She jerked her head back at his words. He forced himself to meet her shocked, wide-eyed gaze and waited for whatever she would say.

Minerva couldn’t believe her ears. Albus…loved her? She noticed his eyes linger on her parted lips and flushed, desperately attempting to come up with some sort of response. She took a moment to study him. He looked as apprehensive as she had ever seen him.

He’s like me, she realized. He doesn’t have the faintest hope that I’ll reciprocate.

Minerva responded in the only way she could. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to Albus’. He stiffened in surprise, and then responded gently, hardly daring to believe what was happening.

Minerva boldly slid her tongue into his mouth and he was lost.

The sorcerers stood on the steps of Hogwarts the next evening, with three of their Guardians at their backs; Kero sat on Sakura’s shoulder in his weaker form. Syaoran and Eriol looked intimidating in their traditional robes, Eriol leaning on a golden staff that was half again as tall as he was, topped by a sunburst. Sakura was dressed in robes similar to Syaoran’s, with long sleeves that hid her hands from view completely. Tomoyo was dressed in the English fashion, wearing an elegant violet dress, lace stitched to the hem and collar. With her chin held high, hands folded before her, and a coolly disinterested gaze, she looked every inch an aristocrat.

They waited for the Minister of Magic to appear, to get his measure, and to see what he would do. The Headmaster, his Deputy, and Harry and his friends lingered in the background, curious to see what would happen, and hoping to run interference when Fudge revealed his stunning incompetence.

The castle wasn’t empty, but no one would interrupt the meeting. The students had been sent home; only the staff, injured, and young orphans remained. Sakura was pleased to discover that Rhiannon had been adopted, although it saddened her to realize that she may never see the young girl again.

“He won’t even make it in the front door,” Eriol said, eyes glittering with amusement as they
waited.

“This is why no one will play games with you, Hiiragizawa,” Syaoran grumbled.

“You cheat,” Tomoyo commented wryly. “You cheat abominably.”

“I am simply using what skills I have in my repertoire,” he replied.

“It’s cheating to look at someone else’s hand of cards, just as it’s cheating to look into the future to see the outcome,” Sakura pointed out, leaning forward to get a better view of her English friend.

Harry thought this may be one of the more bizarre conversations he had ever listened to, but before anyone could comment further, the Minister and four Auror guards appeared several kilometers down the path.

Sakura studied Minister Fudge curiously. He was a short, overweight man, and by the time he reached the steps he was puffing lightly. He paused before acknowledging them, removing his lime green bowler hat to wipe his sweating forehead with a handkerchief.

“You must be the so-called sorcerers,” Fudge said condescendingly.

Any thoughts of playing nice abruptly flew from Syaoran’s mind, and Sakura was hard-pressed to keep from grimacing.

He certainly needs training in diplomacy, Eriol observed telepathically. “I am Eriol Hiiragizawa,” he said loud, “And this is Sakura Kinomoto, Kerberos, Syaoran Li, Tomoyo Daidouji, Yue, Ruby Moon, and Spinel Sun.”

“Cornelius Fudge,” he said with a short nod and an oily smile that set Syaoran’s teeth on edge. “Can you prove your claim?”

“Eriol thought you might feel that way,” Sakura said. “This,” she motioned to Kero, “is my Sun Guardian, Kero, in his weaker form.”

“Pleased ta meetcha,” he said curtly as he floated in front of the Card Mistress.

Fudge gasped and one of the Aurors said, “It can talk?”

“Yes, he can talk,” Sakura replied.

“It’s getting him to stop that’s the problem,” Syaoran muttered under his breath, earning a pinch from his girlfriend.

The bright glow of magic caught everyone’s attention as Kero’s wings grew larger and larger, until he was encased in a cocoon. A flash of light blinded the onlookers, and when they could see again, a large, helmeted lion stood before Sakura, stretching out his pure white wings. Even the Hogwarts group was awed, having never seen the transformation before.

“Kero was created a long time ago by a very powerful sorcerer to be both my Guardian and my friend,” Sakura said quietly.

“I suppose that could very well be sorcery,” Fudge said with a pompous nod. “I have never seen anything quite like it.”

Minerva and Harry both discretely rolled their eyes.

“We have much to discuss with you,” Sakura continued politely. “Cleaning up after a war in
addition to the return of sorcerers will be very complicated. When next evil rises – ”

“Aha!” Fudge exclaimed, nearly beside himself as he pointed accusingly at the group. “I knew it! You’re planning on replacing You-Know-Who!”

The sorcerers stared at him in blank astonishment at this abrupt change in behavior. Obviously, the stories about sorcerers had had a more detrimental effect than they had expected. Unless this was simply due to the man’s foolishness and incompetence.

Kero was the first to speak in a disbelieving growl. “You – ” he said a word in Japanese that had his mistress blushing. “– honestly think that Sakura is evil?!”

Ruby Moon cackled, crimson lips parted, wine-red eyes glittering with a mixture of mirth and malice.

The wizards drew back involuntarily.

“As many times as I’ve called Ruby Moon a demon,” the winged panther said dryly, tail twitching, “not even she would stand by and watch or condone the deeds your Lord Voldemort committed.”

Fudge was beginning to turn a very unhealthy shade of purple at what he perceived to be a complete lack of respect. For once, he would have been right. “Arrest them,” the Minister demanded.

Sakura didn’t even blink as the first spell dissipated less than a meter before her, though anger sparked in her emerald green eyes.

“Cornelius!” Dumbledore thundered, drawing his power around him like a cloak. “Cease and desist at once!”

The moment the Aurors turned to the group of wizards, their wands completely disappeared, and only then did it begin to sink in that it was not at all intelligent to attack a group of powerful sorcerers.

“I consider it very impolite to pull a weapon on our friends,” Sakura said softly, eyes narrowed. “And I will make this very clear. We are not, and do not plan on ever becoming, evil. Sorcerers are the caretakers of the earth and those who reside on it: creature or human, those who wield magic or our cousins who wield science. We protect them when no one else can.”

“You are a fool if you believe that evil will never rise and take over again,” Syaoran snarled.

“Always evil will battle good, and good will battle evil. It is a matter of balance, perhaps, or simply the nature of the universe. Neither state will last forever,” Eriol added condescendingly, blue eyes glittering with spite in spite of the faint smile. “My former cousin Yuuko once said, ‘Often people will deny the existence of things they can’t understand or things their minds can’t grasp. If they encounter anything that doesn’t match the world they wish to live in, they decide that it is evil.’ It appears she was right.” It seemed to pain Eriol very much to admit that.

“We came to this meeting with open minds and a willingness to negotiate,” Tomoyo said, gazing upon the Minister and his bodyguards with disappointment. “Obviously, you could not extend the same courtesy.”

“You are just children – ”

“They are the leaders of the race of sorcerers, and some of the most powerful beings on this
earth,” Yue interrupted scornfully. “I suppose it was too much to expect the Minister of Magic to act with a modicum of maturity.”

“So be it,” Sakura said. “I will give you fair warning now. Your isolationism will not last forever. Even now the street people, the homeless of London, know of your existence, and they despise you for your carelessness. If your society and your government cannot overcome their prejudice and close-mindedness, then it will be the worse for you when Muggles, Enchanters, magicians, witch doctors, shamans, soothsayers, and others learn of your existence. You are a minority, not a majority, and you cannot hide forever.”

She sighed. “You have forced our hand. It is obvious that the Wizarding World is not ready to know the existence of sorcerers if you will turn on us so easily. We will retrieve all memory of us, and the wizards and witches of the world will forget.”

“You can’t do that!” Fudge sputtered furiously.

“You do the same to Muggles all the time,” Eriol replied calmly, unconcerned by the fear and anger in the eyes of their detractors.

“That’s different!” one of the Aurors exclaimed, putting to words what the others were thinking.

“How?” Syaoran demanded. Before he could lose his temper further, and before the stupidity of the wizards could provoke him further, he banished them to the middle of London. May you be hit by a bus, he thought irritably.

Sakura turned to see the Minerva, Albus, and the students staring at her with stricken expressions.

“We’ll forget?” the tabby cat Animagus said quietly. “Everything?”

“Some may remember,” Eriol explained, moving closer and returning his staff to its key form. “We are using a lesser form of the spell, one with parameters that does not require so much power. Already, we have drained ourselves too often in a short period of time. If we completely erased every thought of us from wizards around the world, we would be bedridden for days. Rumors will remain, but all first hand memories will be locked away and inaccessible.”

“The more time someone spent with us, the more likely they are to remember,” Sakura said. She grinned a little. “Tabby-chan, and perhaps Dumbledore-sensei, will likely remember. Lupin-sensei, Harry-san, and his friends will likely forget when we leave, but if one of us is near, they may remember. It’s not an exact science.”

It hurt Sakura to think that people she had met only briefly, people she thought could have been friends, would forget her completely. It was as if some part of her ceased to exist. She would become just another stranger to the kind and efficient Madame Pomfrey, the mischievous Weasley twins, the sweet Rhiannon. She would be losing them in a way.

But maybe, when they would meet again, a friendship could be possible. One not with heroes or all-powerful figures of legend, but one of equals in all ways that mattered.

If no one had remembered, Sakura didn’t think she could have gone through with it. But Minerva would remember everything they had been through, and possibly the Headmaster. They could visit and learn.

She looked upon the faces who would miss them, who would be sad when they left, and happy when they eventually returned for a short while. They would be remembered.

And that was enough.
This is where heroes and cowards part ways.

Light the fire, feast
Chase the ghost, give in.
Take the road less traveled by,
Leave the city of fools,
Turn every poet loose.
-Nightwish, Dark Passion Play, “7 Days to the Wolves”

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