Run that by me again?

by Sarah1281

Summary

Ever wonder 'Why don't they just do that' "A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic." Harry and Hermione, however, were raised in the muggle world and are therefore fully capable of thinking things through...
"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?" Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Of course he is," Harry said. "Everyone knows that."

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy."

"I should say so," Harry agreed. "I mean, if you were a friend of Black, he's out to get me, and you applied to teach this year? The timing is a little suspicious."

"And he's a werewolf," Ron added.

Harry looked puzzled. "I know, Ron. He just told us."

"And that doesn't...bother you?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Um, no?"

"Why not?" Ron couldn't believe it. "He's a bloodthirsty monster!"

Hermione, who was still wary of the afflicted professor, looked over in exasperation. "Oh please. Do you honestly see a bloodthirsty monster when you look at Professor Lupin?"

Ron looked. Professor Lupin had reading glasses in his pocket and was looking at Ron's let with obvious concern. "Well, no," he admitted.

"As long as he takes Wolfsbane and is kept isolated during the full moon, which I'm sure Dumbledore makes sure of, his being a werewolf isn't a problem," Hermione continued. "The fact that he's aiding and abetting a dangerous fugitive is."

"I am not," Lupin said irritably. Hermione looked pointedly at their wands still in his hand and Lupin sighed before throwing them back.

Harry, meanwhile, had been trying to remember if that was a full moon or not. He was, however, soon distracted. "You knew the makers...four of them, my father and Sirius Black were inseparable, Peter Pettigrew trailed after them...Professor Lupin's a friend, too, and a werewolf...And Black's a dog...I've got it!"

"Got what?" Ron asked blankly.

"You know how the Marauder's map worked because you're one of the Marauders! You're Moony, Black is Padfoot, if you want Scabbers so badly, he must be Pettigrew...wait. What the hell does Prongs mean?" Harry asked.

"James was a stag," Black offered.

"That doesn't explain the nickname."

"Yes it does, Prongs, antlers," Black insisted.

"Well, if you're going to be obscure, I suppose..." Harry conceded.

"It's not that obscure, Harry," Hermione corrected.
"Hey, my relatives locked me in a cupboard whenever I wasn't at home or cleaning for ten years!" Harry said defensively. "Give me a break!" Lupin and Black looked concerned, so Harry quickly went on, "So, you think Scabbers is Pettigrew?"

"No, I know he is," Black growled.

"How?" Hermione asked. "And was Harry right about the Marauders?"

"Yes, he was," Black said impatiently. "Besides, I'd seen Peter transform hundreds of times. How could I not recognize him?"

"Because…all rats look the same?" Harry suggested.

"Well, there was also the fact he cut off his toe," Black admitted.

"Not that I can believe," Hermione said.

"…So, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along," Lupin concluded.

"Snape?" said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers for the first time in ten minutes and looking up at Lupin. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

Harry stared at him. "You know, this is the third time we've mentioned him."

"Really?" Black blinked.

"Yeah. First was when Hermione said she found out about the werewolf thing because of Snape's essay and then when he said Snape brewed Wolfsbane," Ron chimed in. "Although they did say 'Professor' those two times and so maybe you just couldn't wrap your mind around the fact that he ever became a teacher. I know I can't, and I didn't even know him before."

"That's probably it," Sirius agreed.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione huffed. "That's ridiculous; you just weren't listening and if you don't listen you can't complain when you don't understand!"

"How do you even know each other? I mean, Black was in Azkaban since my parents died… were you at school together?" Harry asked.

Lupin nodded. "He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore all year that I am not to be trusted. He has his reasons… you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me—"

"It couldn't be so bad as to cause him to carry a grudge for all these years, though," Hermione said reasonably. "I mean, it's not like Mr. Black tried to feed him to you when you were transformed, right?"

There was an awkward silence.

"Oh my God!" Hermione cried, horrified.

Black made a derisive noise. "It served him right," he sneered. "Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to…hoping he could get us expelled…"

"Severus was very interested in where I went every month," Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione.
"Why?" Harry asked.

"Pardon?" Lupin queried.

"Why would Snape care where you went? I know I wouldn't and Snape calls me nosy at least twice a week."

"Well, er, we were in the same year, you know, and we—er—didn't like each other very much," Lupin tried to explain.

"So? If Malfoy were gone once a month and I didn't have to listen to his snide comments every time I nearly get myself killed, which also happens about once a month, I'd throw a party, not investigate," Harry pointed out.

"Well, Severus clearly differs from you, then. For one thing, he's a Slytherin—" Lupin began.

"Oh please," Harry said. "The hat tried to put me in Slytherin."

Black gasped, horrified, and backed away from Harry.

"Hey," Harry said, annoyed. "You tried to feed a classmate to a werewolf because he annoyed you, you don't have room to talk."

Lupin apparently had no response to Harry's comment and so continued with what he was saying. "He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch field."

Harry stared at him. "That's ridiculous. I mean, just look at me. I got on the team my first year. Youngest player in a bloody century. I've only ever lost due to circumstances beyond my control—namely Hufflepuff-supporting Dementors. I managed to win when my DADA Professor tried to hex me and when a house elf tried to kill me in order to save my life. I think the entire school is jealous of my Quidditch talent, but the only one who hates me for it is Malfoy."

"So you see, things like that do happen—" Lupin started to say.

"But he already hated me, so that doesn't count," Harry disagreed.

"Anyway," Lupin continued, ignoring Harry for the sake of time. "Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be—er—amusing to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tired it—if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf—but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life…Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on, he knew what I was…"

"Excuse me," Hermione said. "Now, I've tried to let you explain everything so as to give you the benefit of the doubt, but honestly, I just have to get this out of my system. Firstly, the Slytherin Common Room is under the lake, so he couldn't have seen you from there, and no, before you ask, there is not point in asking me how I know that. If professor Snape were to see you, he'd have to be outside. Why would he be out there after dinner? Unless he was visiting Hagrid, there seems no reason to do this. Secondly, even if he had seen you, you were with Madam Pomfrey, so it was clearly for a medical reason—"

"Unless he thought they were having an affair!" Ron suggested.
"That would be highly unprofessional. Not to mention they could have just used her office," Harry pointed out. "But please continue, Hermione."

"Thank you. Now, as Madam Pomfrey is a staff member with an impeccable reputation, clearly the excursion was sanctioned by the Headmaster and so he really shouldn't have gone after him. I mean, we wouldn't, not if it were someone we didn't suspect to be evil, such as Madame Pomfrey or Professor McGonagall. Thirdly, why in the world would Professor Snape take advice from someone who he hated and vice versa?"

"Yeah," Ron said, looking pointedly at Harry. "That was almost as stupid as when Harry decided to go chasing after a mass-murderer because Malfoy suggested it."

"Well," Lupin said tactfully. "You have to remember, we were sixteen."

Hermione snorted. "And I'm fourteen and I can see why that's not the best plan."

Lupin sighted. Clearly this was not going at all the way he'd planned. "What do you think Harry?"

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly. "Because you tried to eat him as a kid."

There was a sound from behind Lupin. I definitely heard something that time."

"I told you, this place is haunted!" Ron insisted.

"Out of curiosity, why does it matter if it is haunted? I mean Hogwarts is haunted and it's a school! Ghosts can't harm you, only poltergeists, and they wouldn't stay somewhere with no people, so why is everyone so terrified?" Hermione asked, annoyed.

Black actually grinned. "Dumbledore is the propaganda god."

"And I didn't TRY to eat Severus," Lupin said, somewhat reproachfully.

"But you nearly did all the same," countered Harry. "And I'm guessing that that would be a very traumatizing experience. Did you apologize to him?"

"I. Didn't. Do. Anything. Wrong."

"So? I apologized to Justin because I saved his life in a foreign language," Harry pointed out.

"Parseltongue is not a foreign language!" Ron protested.

As Black shuddered again and pretended to faint and Lupin gaped wordlessly and mouthed 'Parseltongue', Harry just crossed his arm. "Oh no? Then what do you call it Because talking to snakes seems pretty foreign to me."

"Well, it is, I guess…But you made it sound like you were speaking French or something."

"Now, if I'd spoken French, I would have deserved to be shunned. Parseltongue, though, is decidedly non-French. And wasn't Saint Patrick a Parselmouth?"

"I can look it up, Harry, but perhaps we should get back to the matter at hand?" Hermione suggested.

"Oh, right. You know, wizards are incredibly laid-back when it comes to near-death experiences, aren't they?" Harry asked rhetorically. "God knows that in the muggle-world if you tried to feed a classmate to a wild animal or expose them to a painful, ostracizing, and debilitating disease, or any
"But your father pulled Snape back at great risk to himself!" Lupin repeated.

Harry sighed. "You wanna take this Hermione?"

"I suppose I might as well," Hermione agreed. "Professor, just because someone stopped the attempted murder from happening doesn't mean it wasn't attempted murder. And didn't you say that your friends became Animagi so that they could be around you safely when you were transformed?"

"Yes…"

"So even if Harry's father didn't turn into a stag in order to protect you guy's secret, he still had the option to do that if things went poorly and so therefore he wasn't really in any danger," Hermione continued.

"I…" Lupin trailed off.

"And aside from the accidental attempted eating, if you keep defending Black's attempts to murder an innocent if somewhat annoying 16-year-old, no wonder he still holds a grudge, even though you laid off after that," Hermione concluded.

"Wait, you guys did lay off him after you nearly got him killed, right?" Harry asked.

Black snorted. "Why should we? He had it coming!"

Harry exploded at that. "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?"

"We were being plagued by greasy gits," Black said, as if it were obvious. "Or by one in particular, rather, but you get what I mean, right?"

"You…you tried to kill a classmate—or, at best, simply didn't care if he died or became a werewolf, when you must have known what a terrible affliction that was! And after that, you kept right on tormenting him! That shows an almost incredible degree of shallowness!"

"Be that as it may," Lupin said, clearly trying to control himself. "Severus still harbors a schoolboy grudge and—"

"A-A schoolboy grudge?" Hermione nearly shrieked. "That's what you think this is about? Not the fact that you guys nearly killed him and then showed quite clearly that Harry's father only saved him so you two wouldn't get in trouble? Black would have been expelled, but probably could have gone to Durmstang and the Ministry would have pushed for you to be executed!"

"And if Malfoy almost got me eaten by a were-wolf Goyle and Crabbe pulled me back to save their own skins, I'd—well, first I'd berate myself for being stupid enough to listen to Malfoy," Hermione sent another pointed glance in Harry's direction. "And then I would have a legitimate reason to hold a grudge, even IF they repented and became saints, and especially if they continued persecuting me!"

"You guys are no fun," grumbled Sirius. "JAMES would have done it."

"He did do it. And I'm starting to think that maybe he was a horrible person, after all. I mean, I don't actually know anything positive about him except loyalty to a bunch of irresponsible would-be murderers. And to tell you the truth," Harry said frankly. "I think I liked you more when you
"Were a mass-murderer."

"Isn't he still a mass-murderer?" Ron asked tentatively.

"Of course not," Hermione scoffed. "Professor Lupin asked if they 'switched', he must have meant about being a Secret Keeper."

"D-Do you really mean that, Harry?" Sirius asked, aghast. "I was only a kid; you can't hold that against me!"

"I'm not," Harry said flatly. "Although it's really no surprise people were willing to believe, albeit reluctantly, that you were secretly a crazy mass-murdering Death Eater if you pulled stunts like this!" He took a deep breath. "But seriously, it's more the fact that almost the first thing you said to me, after spending twelve years in prison and on the run, trying desperately to contact me without being detected, is that you still think Professor Snape deserved to die a horrible, painful death for being annoying when he was sixteen, which, by the way, was eighteen years ago!"

There was another awkward silence. Finally, Ron coughed and said uncomfortably, "So, what's this about Scabbers?"

"He's Pettigrew. I suggested he be the Secret Keeper because I was too obvious, but he turned out to be a Death Eater—"

"Is there any reason you didn't check him for the Dark Mark before entrusting him with something as important as the lives of two of your best friends?" Ron interrupted.

"The what?" Harry asked.

"You-Know-Who's brand, all Death Eaters have them," Ron explained.

"That actually never occurred to us," Sirius said. "I'm not sure why, that seems like it should be a basic safety measure...But anyway, when I realized what happened, I cornered him, he yelled that I betrayed Lily and James, blew the street apart, and transformed."

"Then why did you say that YOU killed them?" Ron asked.

"Because I suggested that they switch!" Black burst out.

"Look, I get that you feel guilty," Harry told him. "But you've got to stop saying that you killed my parents. People will get the wrong idea."

"I don't believe Scabbers is Pettigrew," Ron said bluntly. "Is there any way you can prove it?"

"Yes, give us the rat," Lupin said in a steely tone. "Ready, Sirius?" Lupin asked, taking the squirming Scabbers from the hesitant Ron.

Black nodded and, picking up Ron's wand, asked quietly, "Together?"

"I think so. On the count of three. One—Two—THREE!"

"Well that was...unexpected..." Ron managed to say, staring at the rat-like man.

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does..."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Lupin. "Stand aside, Harry."
Harry hesitated.

"I'm going to tie him up," said Lupin. "That's all, I swear."

As Harry moved to step aside, a voice cried out, "Stupefy!" and Pettigrew collapsed.

"What the—Snape?" Harry asked, dumbstruck.

"That's right," Snape sneered, pulling off Harry's invisibility cloak.

"What are you doing here?" Black spat.

"Well, I was going to feed you to the Dementors, but then I had the unexpected privilege of
listening to your own godson tear you a new one on my behalf, so I thought I might as well let this
little drama play out and only intervene if it were necessary."

"You consider this necessary?" Lupin asked.

"Yes," Snape nodded. "He can still transform when he's tied up and one distraction would give
him all the opportunity he needs. Not to mention you'd never find him at night and he can't
transform when he's stunned."

"What kind of distraction?" Harry asked curiously before realization struck him. "It is a full moon
tonight, isn't it?"

"Very good, Potter," Snape nodded. "Yes, it is and the werewolf is a danger as he didn't take his
potion."

"It's not very nice to call him 'the werewolf'," Harry said.

"Be that as it may, Potter, I'm just reminding everyone that he is, in fact, a werewolf and sooner or
later the clouds will part and he will transform," Snape told him.

"So you realized he forgot to take his potion but didn't bring any with you?" Hermione asked
incredulously.

Snape froze. "You're right, I did bring some. I'd forgotten in all the excitement, but…Here," he
thrust a smoking goblet at Remus, who took it gratefully.

"Now I won't be a danger to you, but the sight of me would still panic people, so I'd better stay
here," Lupin said, downing the goblet. "Can I trust you to take this matter to Dumbledore,
Severus?"

Snape nodded. "Of course. But I will have to let people know about your…condition, you
realize."

"Bloody hell!" Ron burst out. "Is this position cursed?"

"Actually, yes," Snape affirmed.

"But…Professor Lupin's the best DADA Professor we've ever had!" Harry protested.

"Given Professors I've-Got-You-Know-Who-On-The-Back-Of-My-Head-And-So-Am-Too-
Distracted-To-Teach-Properly and Memory-Charms-Are-The-Only-Spell-I-Know-How-To-Do,
that's not saying much." At Hermione's glare, Ron protested, "Oh, you know it's true!"
"Not that Professor Lupin isn't a really good teacher, Harry, because he is," Hermione added earnestly. "It's just that...he's dangerous.

"No he's not-" Harry began.

"Yes, Harry, he is. If Professor Snape hadn't been here, Professor Lupin would have tried to kill us when he transformed and very well might have. I suppose the muggle-world equivalent would be a violent schizophrenic, who the Headmaster assured him would be safe as long as he took his medication, which he forgot tonight, even BEFORE seeing the Map. And even when he is on it, so to speak, our safety clearly matters less to him than losing face by confessing that fifteen years ago, he broke a few rules and now someone who he sincerely believed to be a mass-murderer could turn into a dog and hide on the grounds as well as sneak into the castle several different ways," Hermione finished with a flourish.

"But that's not how it was—" Lupin started to say.

"Regardless of your intentions, Lupin, that's exactly how it was," Snape cut him off.

Lupin opened his mouth to retort when Harry cut in. "We can discuss this later. Right now, we need to get out of here because, Wolfsbane Potion or no, I don't really want to see this..."

As they started to leave, Black said casually, "So, I know this probably isn't the best time to ask, but you said that your relatives locked you in a cupboard, so I was wondering if maybe you'd like to come live with me once I'm cleared?"

"Sure," Harry shrugged.

Snape stopped dead and stared at him. "You can't be serious, Potter, he tried to kill me."

"I know that, sir," Harry replied evenly. "So it would be foolhardy if you would have agreed to live with him. He seems to like me, though, despite the fact I've mostly just yelled at him, and besides, in addition to being locked in a cupboard, my aunt routinely swings a frying pan at my head. Which, by the way, is also attempted murder."

Snape was about to respond when Ron cried out, "Dementors!"

"I'll handle this," Snape said smoothly. "Potter standing up to Black on my account...Oh, this should power a patronus every day for the rest of my life..."

When they got back to the castle, Pettigrew still unconscious, Fudge was surprised, to say the least. "Black...Black was innocent, then?"

Snape was about to say something when Dumbledore shot him a Look. "Of this, yes," he finally said.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no..." Fudge moaned, head in his hands. "The press'll have a field day with this! An innocent man in Azkaban, Dementors attempting to suck the souls out of innocent children...My career is over!"

Sensing that if his career really was at stake, Fudge would organize a massive cover-up, Hermione quickly spoke up. "Not if you tell them all about how you managed to weave through the web of lies and, in dogged pursuit of justice, ferreted out the truth, sir."

"Hm, that could work...I'd better call the Daily Prophet. Albus, may I use your floo?" Fudge asked.
"Certainly, Cornelius, it's right this way," Dumbledore said graciously. "Severus, if you'd be so kind as to show him?"

As Snape and Fudge left, Harry casually remarked, "By the way, I'm moving in with Sirius."

Dumbledore sighed and said gravely, "My dear boy, I'm afraid that's out of the question. You're only safe from Voldemort's supporters at your Aunt's house."

"And she routinely tries to kill me, so you know what? I'll take my chances," Harry decided.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I cannot allow that."

"With all do respect, sir," Harry said. "You don't exactly have a say in the matter. I mean, Sirius is my legal godfather and my legal guardians would have no problem signing off on granting custody of me to a mass-murderer. You're the Headmaster of my school and, worse come to worse, I can simply transfer. What was that one school you were talking about earlier Hermione?"

"Durmstang," she replied.

All the blood drained out of Dumbledore's face at the thought of Harry Potter going to the most reputed Dark Arts School in all of Europe. "On second thought, I'm sure we can provide you with adequate protection at your new place of residence."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a grin. That was too easy.
"Harry? What are you doing up here?" Hermione asked, barging into the room Harry was hiding in.

"Angsting," came the succinct response.

"I can see that. Any particular reason?" Hermione asked. When Harry opened his mouth to answer, however, she quickly added, "Aside from the obvious?"

"I think Lord Voldemort is spiriting me away every night, possessing me and forcing me to do his dastardly deeds, and then returning me without anyone noticing anything at all," Harry told her glumly.

She promptly burst out laughing.

"Hermione! This is serious!" Harry scolded.

"Sorry, Harry," she apologized, struggling to simultaneously stop giggling and refrain from making a Sirius pun. "But that's ridiculous."

"Is it? Why?" Harry demanded angrily.

"Well, even if we ignore the whole 'no one noticed you were gone' and the 'you can't Apparate or Disapparate at Hogwarts' aspects of why that's impossible, there are plenty of other reasons," Hermione informed him.

"There are? Like what?" Harry challenged.

Hermione sighed. "Look, Harry, I realize you're angsting right now, but that doesn't mean you have to go and have a Wizard Moment, too."

Harry looked injured. "I am not! I'm being perfectly logical!"

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry, you're not. Let's say for a minute that you're right and Voldemort really managed to kidnap you. He wants you dead. Why are you still alive and why in the world would he return you every night only to re-kidnap you?"

"I…you're right, Hermione," Harry smiled weakly at her. "But then how do you explain my vision of being a snake?"

"You clearly share some sort of a connection to Voldemort-" she began.

This time, Harry laughed. "So I've been told. I don't know anything about it, though, which is why it's freaking me out so badly."

"Ask Dumbledore," Hermione suggested.

"He's avoiding me," Harry said flatly.

"Then you stand outside his office and list off every single sweet you can think of, and then don't leave his office until he talks to you. You don't always need to wait until the end of the years to ask questions," Hermione pointed out.
"Yeah, first year, when I asked why Voldemort tried to kill me, he said something to the effect of 'I'll tell you when you're older.' Well, now I am. Do you think the reason he tried to kill me and my connection to him are related?" he asked anxiously.

She shrugged. "I don't know, Harry. Maybe."

"I just…hate being connected to him, you know? It feels like I'm like him," Harry confided.

"Okay, I take it back. Your kidnapping theory was just silly, this is ridiculous," Hermione said before abruptly leaving the room. She came back a few moments later, lugging a large but surprisingly not dusty book with her. "You are NOTHING like Voldemort!" she declared.

"But we have similar backgrounds, look alike, and are both half-bloods…" Harry listed off.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Do you have any idea how many half-bloods there are in the world? And how many guys who have dark hair? And there have GOT to be other people who grew up neglected. And even if there weren't, things like that say nothing about your personality, they are merely chance and outside forces," Hermione countered. "Now listen, in my noble quest to drive Umbridge insane, I went out and got a book on psychology. One of the topics covered in here reminds me an awful lot of our favorite snake-man."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Lord Voldemort is a psychopath."

Harry looked blankly at her. "I'm not so good at psychology. All I know is that that means he likes killing people, but I doubt that alone would qualify as its own psychological disorder."

"You're right, it wouldn't," Hermione nodded. "And it has nothing to do with upbringing. I can tell you what the book says the characteristics are and we can go through why it fits him and not you if you'd like to reassure yourself."

"Alright," Harry nodded. "What's the first characteristic say?"

"Glibness and superficial charm," Hermione read. "Well, he managed to get a bunch of rich elitist to take orders from half-blood and gained a ton of followers, even before he was insanely powerful."

"I can't stop people from thinking I'm an evil attention-seeking lunatic," Harry offered.

"Very good. Next is 'manipulative and conning. They never recognize the rights of others and see their self-serving behaviors as permissible. They appear to be charming, yet are covertly hostile and domineering, seeing their victim as merely an instrument to be used. They may dominate and humiliate their victims.' Wow, this is how Voldemort treats his followers."

"Yeah, when he was dealing with Cedric, he just outright killed him, but he Crucio'd one of his followers," Harry chimed in.

"Whereas you couldn't manipulative yourself out of a paper bag, I mean, honestly, if you could then maybe you could convince people that you're not evil. Then there is 'Grandiose Sense of Self. Feels entitled to certain things as 'their right.' Well, Voldemort certainly seems to feel entitled to kill everyone he sees and conquer the whole planet."

"And I wasn't even feeling entitled to stay at Hogwarts before you came up here," Harry said. "I was going to go back to my highly neglectful and abusive relatives because I thought that, being possessed my Voldemort, I didn't deserve anything else."
"We have got to start working on your self-esteem Harry, honestly. I'm going to send you The Secret for your birthday, I swear," she said idly, glancing down at the book in her hands. "Pathological Lying. Has no problem lying coolly and easily and it is almost impossible for them to be truthful on a consistent basis. Can create, and get caught up in, a complex belief about their own powers and abilities. Extremely convincing and even able to pass lie detector tests.' While I'm sure he's never actually taken a standard polygraph, it wouldn't surprise me to know that he is immune to Veritaserum and obviously he's a great liar if he has followers despite the fact that he wants to kill all things, everywhere."

"Everyone THINKS I'm a pathological liar," Harry said. "But come to think of it, everyone always knows when I'm lying. Always. Even people who probably don't know Legillemency, if it's as obscure as Snape says it is."

"Lack of Remorse, Shame or Guilt A deep seated rage, which is split off and repressed, is at their core. Does not see others around them as people, but only as targets and opportunities. Instead of friends, they have victims and accomplices who end up as victims. The end always justifies the means and they let nothing stand in their way.' Wow, it's like this was written JUST FOR HIM. I mean, that pretty much describes the Death Eaters to a T. We should really send Malfoy a copy of this part; he's always so pleased that his father is Voldemort's lackey. And I think the fact that Voldemort is still trying to kill you, fourteen years later, goes to show he has no shame. I mean, you were only an infant at the time!" Hermione finished, a bit angry. "I mean, what kind of person could stalk and try to kill someone for years, ever since they were a BABY?"

"A psychopath?" Harry suggested with a smirk, touched by her concern. "And I feel guilty every time something bad happens to anyone I've ever met. Ever. Even if I'm not in any way responsible. Oh, except if they're in Slytherin, but that was an inherited prejudice. I feel guilty for my parents' deaths, and Quirrell's death, and Lockhart's memory loss, and Ginny's near-death experience, and Hagrid getting sent to Azkaban, and Cedric dying, and Pettigrew getting away, and…"

"Okay, that's quite enough, Harry," Hermione quickly interrupted as he paused to take a breath. Harry felt guilty enough for two people. "Then there's 'Shallow Emotions: When they show what seems to be warmth, joy, love and compassion it is more feigned than experienced and serves an ulterior motive. Outraged by insignificant matters, yet remaining unmoved and cold by what would upset a normal person. Since they are not genuine, neither are their promises.' I can't ever imagine him being…warm, but he must have at least pretended to be at one point, or else someone would have thought that there was something seriously wrong with him."

"Malfoy is never warm," Harry pointed out.

"And we think that there is something seriously wrong with him. It wouldn't surprise anyone in the slightest if he 'went bad' as Hagrid would put it, but no one (except Dumbledore) suspected that would happen with Tom Riddle. Also, he was completely unconcerned that his plans involved killing a baby and yet he gets mad whenever anyone addresses him by his real name. I mean, I can see how you could get annoyed, if you really didn't like it, like I do when you guys call me 'Mione, but actually enraged? That's kind of overreacting."

"Whereas I apparently have so much love all around me that evil people start to burn if they touch me," Harry said. "Which is kind of weird. But anyway, I don't THINK that I don't care about important things or care too much about insignificant things."

"I don't know about that, Harry." Hermione teased. "Exams are pretty important and I still don't understand the point of Quidditch."
"Hermione, I think you've got that backwards, you're the one with the mixed-up priorities," Harry corrected.

"Well, we'll just see about that in five years when I'm a successful whatever-I-decide-to-do and you get a career-ending Quidditch injury," Hermione told him. "'Incapacity for love.' Well, I think that one's actually pretty self-explanatory. Or, at least, Dumbledore already explained it. 'Need for Stimulation: Living on the edge. Verbal outbursts and physical punishments are normal. Promiscuity and gambling are common.'" Both she and Harry looked sick. "I…can understand that Voldemort always needs to try and be one step ahead and killing people, and he has plenty of verbal outbursts and torture his Death Eaters like there's no tomorrow but…promiscuity?"

"Who would want to…?" Harry couldn't even finish the thought.

"I don't know, I've heard that he and Bellatrix Lestrange were…close. But then, she's a nutcase, so perhaps that explains it," Hermione said, shuddering.

"BAD MENTAL IMAGES!" Harry shouted, envisioning the two together.

"Well, uh, gambling, right? He certainly risked everything by going after you when you were a baby, didn't he?" Hermione quickly changed the subject.

"Ah, but he didn't know that, I don't think," Harry told her.

"Well, he risked everything coming to Hogwarts first year. And bringing you to the Graveyard in fourth. I mean, you may have only been fourteen, but he had Wormtail as a bodyguard. That was nerves of steel, there. I mean, I wouldn't trust him against anyone older than a first year. After all, second years are capable of killing Basilisks. With lots of assistance, mind you, but fully capable none the less," Hermione said.

"Not ALL second years," he reminded her. "That was only me, and you're right, I had a LOT of help."

"And Voldemort wasn't faced with all fourth years, only you. And while I'll admit that this year you've had at least one verbal outburst a week, I think that's more to do with the fact that you're a teenager, Voldemort is out to kill you, no one believe you about that and thinks you're crazy, Umbridge is here, and your scar hurts all the time. You've never been physically abusive, though, and that's an important difference. You do seem to always seek out trouble, but I think that's more because there are always people out to cause trouble in your general vicinity than because you crave the stimulation.

"Anyway, the next one is 'Callousness/Lack of Empathy: Unable to empathize with the pain of their victims, having only contempt for others' feelings of distress and readily taking advantage of them.' I think the fact that Voldemort is a mass-murderer makes it apparent that he's not capable of empathy. And he preys on people's emotional distress to use as pawns," Hermione said. "What do you think Harry? Harry?"

"Huh?" Harry jumped. "Sorry Hermione, I just realized something. I don't doubt that he has empathy or anything, but I just realized that that whole 'readily taking advantage of others' feelings' sounds just like Dumbledore and what he does to Snape."

"Snape?" Hermione asked confused. "What-"

"I hear things," Harry shrugged. "But anyway, I may not be the best at empathizing, but at least I know how to! I mean, I feel really bad whenever Ron gets self-conscious about the fact that his parents aren't obscenely wealthy like mine were."
"Obscenely?" Hermione asked raising her eyebrow. "Just how rich were your parents, Harry?"

"I don't know," Harry shrugged. "Rich enough for a teenage boy to not need to depend on his
deadbeat relatives and to get by until he gets a decent job rich, at least."

"Well, you really should check that out, when you're old enough to actually care," Hermione
advised. "Poor Behavioral Controls/Impulsive Nature: Rage and abuse, alternating with small
expressions of love and approval produce an addictive cycle for abuser and abused, as well as
creating hopelessness in the victim.' I'm not exactly sure about this, but I'm guessing that's how he
turned the otherwise haughty Pureblood elite into his lapdogs."

"I suppose I might have some impulse-control issues this year," Harry admitted. "But again, very
stressful year, hormones raging, I've heard that's normal. And I'm certainly not seeking out
victims."

"Here's another one that could also apply to Dumbledore. 'Believe they are all-powerful, all-
knowing, entitled to every wish, no sense of personal boundaries, no concern for their impact on
others.' I mean, it fits Voldemort, too, but when I think of 'thinks they know what's best for
everyone', I think of Dumbledore," Hermione said.

"Yeah, me too. But even though Snape certainly seems to think that this applies to me, I know that
while I'm fairly powerful for my age, I still wouldn't want to duel a grown wizard and I don't
know enough, that's my problem," Harry said, looking a little depressed again.

Hermione quickly continued with the next item on the list, "Early Behavior Problems/Juvenile
Delinquency: Usually has a history of behavioral and academic difficulties, yet "gets by" by
conning others. Problems in making and keeping friends; aberrant behaviors such as cruelty to
people or animals, stealing, etc.' I don't know…I'm not sure that this fits Voldemort. He got an
award for special services to the school, even if he did set a Basilisk on it first, so he certainly DID
things like that, but I don't think he got caught, and his grades couldn't have been a problem if he
was Head Boy."

"He did steal things, though, he kept trophies from the kids at his orphanage and they were all
terrified of him," Harry offered.

"How did you-" Hermione broke off when she saw Harry just cross his arms. "Oh, right, you
'hear things.'"

"My grades weren't the best before I came here because I could never do much better than my
cousin or else my guardians wouldn't feed me. Because of that, I got into the habit of not really
applying myself, which explains my initial grade issues here."

"And your later grade issues?" Hermione pressed.

"Only in boring classes with horrible teachers," Harry replied. "And I've kept you and Ron as my
friends for four and a half years now, so that's not an issue. I don't think I've ever been cruel to
animals…Oh, except for keeping an owl in a cage, but that's a widespread cruelty across our
society. I might have some issues making new friends, but that's because most people just want to
be friends with my scar."

"Was Riddle cruel to animals?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "Probably. His uncle liked to nail live snakes to the front door of his house," he
offered.

"Ew," Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Irresponsibility/Unreliability: Not concerned about
wrecking others' lives and dreams. Oblivious or indifferent to the devastation they cause. Does not accept blame themselves, but blames others, even for acts they obviously committed.' Yeah… just…yeah. Didn't he blame your mom once for him killing her, because she wouldn't just hand you over to him?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, and he keeps telling me that if I would only join him, he wouldn't have to keep trying to murder me. Whereas I don't want to wreck anyone's life or dream unless, of course, it happened to involve massive corruption and/or trying to hurt me or someone I care about."

"'Promiscuous Sexual Behavior/Infidelity: Promiscuity, child sexual abuse, rape and sexual acting out of all sorts.'" Harry and Hermione exchanged nauseated looks and Hermione quickly moved on to the next one. "'Lack of Realistic Life Plan/Parasitic Lifestyle: Tends to move around a lot or makes all encompassing promises for the future, poor work ethic but exploits others effectively.' Well, I don't think 'Evil Overlord' is a very realistic career goal, but it seems to be working out for him. Definitely parasitic lifestyle, he makes his followers do everything and just sits back and plots and thinks about how evil he is and tries to figure out how to murder a teenager."

"I don't have the best work ethic, but I don't really know how to exploit anyone. I want to be an Auror, which is pretty unrealistic at the moment, but should I actually grow up and not be killed by Voldemort, I'll probably have the skills and experience necessary to do fine, there," Harry announced.

"'Criminal or Entrepreneurial Versatility: Changes their image as needed to avoid prosecution. Changes life story readily,'" Hermione read. That was the last one on the list. "He's changed the part of his life about being a half-blood and about being named Tom Riddle, about being scared of Dumbledore about, well, everything except being the heir of Slytherin, which he kept quiet about while at Hogwarts."

Harry snorted. "I don't need to change my life story, the Daily Prophet is more than willing to do it for me."

"So do you see, Harry, how the only similarities you have here are those that can be accounted for by the fact that you're a teenager. He really should have grown out of those things by now, but he can't, because he's a psychopath."

"Thanks Hermione," Harry smiled at her. "If it weren't for you, I'd still be worried about getting 'spirited away' by Voldemort every night."

"Don't mention it," she smiled back at him.

Suddenly, they heard thundering outside the door.

"Hey Harry!" Ron called through the door. "We're here to cheer you up!"

"Where were you ten minutes ago?" Hermione demanded when Harry threw the door open. "I could have really used your help!" Harry looked at her skeptically. "On the other hand, it was probably for the best."
"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

"There is no way I'm dealing with this by myself," Harry whispered back, grabbing her arm. "And besides, I really don't know much about wizarding law or about the Triwizard Tournament."

"But...they only called you!" Hermione protested as he started to drag her up with him.

"Hey, I'm a minor; I think I'm allowed an attorney."

"I'm a minor, too!" she pointed out.

"And I'm willing to bet you're at least smarter than Bagman," Harry assured her.

"Miss Granger, what are you going up here?" Dumbledore asked.

"Apparently I'm Harry's legal representation," she answered with a wry smile.

"I see…Well, through the door then," said Dumbledore, frowning a little.

Once they passed through, they saw the other champions gathered around the fire. Fleur saw them first, and asked, "What is it? Do zey want us back in ze hall? And why do zey need to send two mezzengers?"

"We're not messengers," Harry explained. "I'm a victim of fraud and she's the only other sane person I know."

Fleur just looked confused by that statement, especially when Ludo Bagman burst into the room and proclaimed that Harry was a champion as well. She made a few cursory protests but was cut off by the arrival of everyone who could have anything relevant to add and Professor Snape. Because as he wasn't a judge or the head of Harry's house, there was really no reason for him to be there.

"Madame Maxine!" Fleur complained. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

"First of all, only Mr. Bagman said it, so that's hardly a 'they'," Harry said, annoyed. "Secondly, I'm not competing. And thirdly, I'm only three years younger than you, that hardly makes me a 'little boy'."

"But you are smaller zan me," Fleur explained.

"So anyone shorter than you is automatically a little boy? You know, there are plenty of people who are just naturally short and find your discrimination appalling. Besides, I'm pretty sure I'm only this short because my guardians refused to feed me for days at a time and locked me in the cupboard under the stairs on a regular basis?" Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Is it really any wonder I wanted to go live with an escaped alleged mass-murderer?"

"There was nothing alleged about it!" Mr. Crouch snapped.

"Until there's a trial, the charges are alleged," Hermione pointed out.
"There were witnesses!" Crouch protested.

"You know, they really would have come in handy at his TRIAL," Harry said pointedly. "Besides, Sirius and Pettigrew are both wizards, the witnesses were Muggles. Don't you think it's possible they could have been confused about what they saw?"

"I…That's not the point! We're here to discuss your entering yourself into the Triwizard Tournament!" Crouch deflected.

"Who says I entered myself into the tournament?" Harry asked.

"Well, who else would have?" Crouch asked rhetorically.

Harry stared at him for a long moment. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"No, I didn't," Harry replied. "In fact, I believe that I can have three dozen witnesses attesting to how much I think this tournament is a horrible idea because we can't have Quidditch and how glad I was that I'd not have to risk my life this year because, quite frankly, I'm really getting sick of the Hospital Wing. Why in the world would I enter a competition that KILLS PEOPLE when I don't really need to tempt fate and am not exactly the top of my class."

"Why are you complaining?" Fleur demanded, stamping her foot. "You 'ave a chance to compete, don't you? We 'ave all been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons inprize money—zis is a chance many would die for!"

"Then let them compete," Harry said shrugging. "Do you know who I am?"

"Everyone knows who you are," Fleur said, a bit confused.

"And how long have you known who I am?" Harry asked her patiently.

"Almost my 'ole life."

"Hm, okay, I've got 'glory' down, or at least for me. Having Professor Dumbledore as Headmaster pretty much secures glory for the school, plus I go here. As for the prize money…Do you realize how much money my parents left me? I mean, I'm not sure of the exact amount, but I've heard that my parents didn't even need real jobs because of my dad's inheritance. 1000 galleons really doesn't matter to me, and I try not to spend obscene amounts of money anyway because then Ron gets jealous and doesn't speak to me for days."

Snape chuckled darkly. "You claim that you don't seek glory, well then why don't you try explaining your track record for the past three years at this school? Dragon-hatching, going after a stone in a corridor that was forbidden to enter on pain of death, flying a car to school disappearing into the Chamber of Secrets, sneaking into Hogsmeade, chasing after mass-murderers and werewolves…"

Krum and Fleur looked a little impressed with his track record while Cedric leaned forward. Listening to Harry's explanations was always entertaining.

"Okay, first of all, if Professor Dumbledore had bothered to check that he was actually needed
before heading off to London, or maybe Apparated or used or Portkey, then I wouldn't have had to go chasing after Professor Quirrell, and if Hagrid had more sense than to raise a dragon in his house, we wouldn't have needed to smuggle him out of the country—" Harry began hotly.

"And for the record," Hermione quickly interrupted him. "All of this is hearsay, so don't bother trying to charge either of them with anything." Crouch, who had been taking notes, looked disappointed.

"Thank you, Hermione. Now, if Mr. Malfoy hadn't been trying to kill off the muggle-borns of Hogwarts and blaming it on Ginny Weasley then his insane house-elf wouldn't have had to seal the platform and if Hermione was there, I wouldn't have let Ron talk me into taking the car. I mean, really, I was twelve, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and they flew the car just fine when they rescued me from my guardians, who had locked me in the bedroom they gave me, put bars on the windows, and served me cold soup twice a day through a slot they put in the door."

"Must you keep bringing that up?" Snape asked, annoyed and slightly guilty due to his role in landing Harry there. He REALLY wished Harry would stop bringing up the whole 'child abuse' issue, especially as there was nothing he could do about it.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Harry said sarcastically. "I'll try harder to only be traumatized when it suits your schedule. But anyway, we wouldn't have NEEDED to go to the Chamber by ourselves if Ginny hadn't been missing and we were running out of time. We could have gone to the professors, granted, but with no proof we weren't sure if they would believe us, and they definitely wouldn't have let me come, and I was the only one who could open the Chamber. As for Hogsmeade, well," he shrugged. "I'm a teenager. What did you expect?"

"We expected you to stay in the castle and not go out and risk your life when a murderer was after you!" Snape told him.

"Hey, you guys didn't know that I even knew about Sirius! And I wouldn't have had I not overheard the Weasley's talking about it before I left for Hogwarts and if I hadn't overheard the Minister talking about it when I snuck into Hogsmeade. And I didn't deliberately go chasing after a mass-murderer, the mass-murderer found us in Hagrid's hut and then Sirius came and kidnapped Ron to get Pettigrew and Remus came later. So believe me, this school nearly gets me killed every few weeks, I REALLY don't need to volunteer to go and get myself killed."

Snape just snorted but didn't respond.

"Be…Be that as it may Harry," Dumbledore said delicately. "I'm afraid you have to participate."

"Why?" Harry asked. "I heard this tournament was voluntary, didn't you Hermione?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Completely voluntary. And it was supposed to be anonymous, so if you weren't chosen no one had to know you entered."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure all the Slytherin's are going to pretend that they never wanted to be part of the tournament anyway now that a Hufflepuff was chosen," Harry looked over at Cedric. "No offence."

"None taken," Cedric assured him. "And with you in the tournament, they'll come out to support me in droves."

"But I'm not in the tournament," Harry reminded him.

"I'm afraid there is no way around it Harry," Dumbledore said gravely. "You have to compete."
"WHY?" Harry asked again.

"Because the Goblet of Fire chose you."

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," Karkaroff said suddenly. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"Fair?" Harry laughed. "So having five 17-year-olds against a 14-year-old is fair now?"

"You're plenty experienced," Karkaroff waved off his concern.

"You know, I think I should be offended by that comment," Harry remarked idly. "Perhaps I should press charges. I take enough hits to my reputation, I don't need slander, too."

"What?" Karkaroff echoed, confused. "I—No! You know I didn't mean that!"

"I know nothing of the sort," Harry sniffed. "And you should really be more careful when you speak."

"You—!" Karkaroff growled.

"I wouldn't advise threatening me," Harry said blithely. "You're going to be in enough trouble with the Ministry and the Daily Prophet as it is."


"Ah, right, that," Harry said casually. "Hermione?"

Hermione, who had been staring unabashedly at Viktor, jumped slightly and turned red. "Well, to begin with, it seems that it's important for the potential champions to enter themselves in the competition, right? Otherwise why have them do it whenever they feel like it during a 24-hour-period when they could just give their names to someone specifically appointed to the task, such as Madame Maxine and Professor Karkaroff from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang respectively and perhaps the heads of houses for Hogwarts and then they could submit the students' names that they received. It's much more orderly and would prevent...misunderstandings...like this from happening.

"And why wasn't there someone standing guard over the Goblet of Fire? It was only for a day and the guard could have rotated. Another security measure. And as for all this talk about how Durmstrang and Beauxbatons want another champion, think of it this way, Harry isn't entered under Hogwarts and he's three years younger than the other champions. As such, the age difference is kind of like three fourths years against a first year. Hardly fair, right?"

"Well, perhaps it's not exactly a fair contest, but then he shouldn't have entered his name in the first place!" Karkaroff insisted.

"Didn't Harry already go over this?" Hermione asked with a sigh. "But just to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, let me see that parchment with his name on it." Dumbledore passed it to her and she studied it briefly before exclaiming triumphantly, "There is no way Harry wrote this!"

"How can you tell?" Professor Moody asked, limping into the room and looking a bit disconcerted.

"It's legible," came the simple response.
"Hey!"

"Makes sense to me," Snape put in.

"You think someone entered Potter into this tournament?" Moody asked thoughtfully. "Yes, that would make sense…"

"Didn't you once smash a gift you received to pieces because you thought it was a cleverly Basilisk egg?" Karkaroff asked contemptuously.

Moody shrugged. "You can never be too careful."

Hermione stared at him. "You know, I can't believe I'm about to say this, but yes, yes you can. First off, there's no such thing as a Basilisk egg. It's a chicken egg that's hatched beneath a toad. Basilisks don't lay egg. Secondly, the egg of a Basilisk is not fatal. You could have opened it to see whether or not it really was one before destroying it. How do you even confuse a clock for a Basilisk egg in the first place?"

"Yeah, and can't your magic eye see though wrapping paper or boxes or whatever it is the clock came in?" Harry added.

Moody looked distinctly uncomfortable and decided not to answer.

"Hey, I've just thought of something. Because I didn't enter, I'm not obliged to compete. Does that mean that whoever did place my name in there has to do it instead?"

Now Moody looked distinctly uncomfortable.

This time, Dumbledore noticed. "Is there a problem, Alastor?"

"N-No problem at all, Albus," Moody said, fumbling for his flask. Unfortunately for him, his nervousness caused him to drop the flask. And spill it all over Professor Snape's robes.

"Ah! Look what you've done you-" Snape trailed off, sniffing his robes. "Is that…Polyjuice?"

"O-Of course not, why would it be-" Moody trailed off as he started to transform into a young blonde man with a pale, freckled face. "Oops."

"Who the hell are you?" Harry asked.

"Barty Crouch Jr.?" Karkaroff asked in disbelief. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"My Master will rise again!" Crouch Jr. started laughing maniacally.

Snape, who had been looking accusingly at Crouch Sr., finally had the presence of mind to stun the young Death Eater.

"Good work, Severus," Albus said calmly. "Now, let's take him up to my office. You had better come, too," he told Crouch Sr. "I'm sure Amelia Bones and Cornelius will be VERY interested to hear how a supposedly dead prisoner escaped Azkaban."

As they left, Harry called after them, "Does this mean I don't have to compete?"

"And is anyone going to explain what just happened?" Hermione asked.

"I need a drink…" said Professor McGonagall as the three Triwizard champions began pressing her for an explanation as well.
In the Gryffindor Common Room that night

"You should've told us you entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half-annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you get it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "And I'm not even—"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor —"

"You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match!" shrieked Katie Bell.

"Oh honestly!" Hermione huffed. "Even if you refuse to believe me about Quidditch being only a game, at least you should remember that it wasn't Cedric's fault that he didn't notice the Dementors and that he tried to get a rematch but Madam Hooch didn't want to have to referee an extra game if she wasn't going to be paid extra for it."

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some—"

"But-" Harry began.

"Let me handle this," Hermione told him, casting a Sonorous on her throat. "While I'm sure that Harry appreciates the sentiment that is causing everyone to party at the thought of him as a Triwizard champion, I regret to inform you that he is not, in fact, a champion."

"But…his name came out of the Goblet of Fire!" Ron pointed out, emerging from wherever he had been hiding and sulking.

"So?" Harry shrugged, able to be heard now that everyone had quieted down. "I didn't enter, and Hermione, who is seriously, like, the most amazing person ever, got me out of having to compete because of that."

"But…why?" one of the twins asked.

"Because I don't really relish the thought of making a fool of myself and possibly dying in front of the entire school and some foreign students all for fame, which I already have enough of, considering I haven't had to introduce myself in over three years now, and fortune, which I inherited," Harry explained.

"But…Gryffindor!" the other twin protested.

"What about it?" Harry asked. "Do you really want us to be horribly disgraced when I died a horrible painful death in an extremely embarrassing manner going up against a full-grown dragon?"

"Dragons? Is that the first task?" Angelina asked eagerly. "How do you know that, I thought it was supposed to be a secret."

"It was," Hermione affirmed. "But that kind of slipped out when Professor McGonagall was explaining to us how a Death Eater who had infiltrated the school and was impersonating Professor Moody could use the tournament to kill and/or kidnap Harry and try some rather idiotic and far-too-complicated plot to revive You-Know-Who."
Of course, that started a whole new round of questions.

Roughly Seven Months Later

Cedric eyed the Cup in front of him warily. Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour had taken each other out, leaving him with a clear path to the cup and a very big problem. He remembered what Harry had said earlier when he pulled him aside before the third task.

"Look Cedric, I know that Crouch Jr. was caught early on and so Voldemort" (Harry had rolled his eyes when Cedric flinched) "was left without an ally in this school, but I somehow doubt he's going to give up so easily just because his initial plan failed. He's had seven months to sneak in another agent, possibly even using Polyjuice Potion again. Be careful."

"But I thought he was only after you?" Cedric had asked, confused.

Harry shook his head. "He said that he wanted me in particular, but that any wizard would do. This is as perfect an opportunity now as it was when they thought I would be a contestant."

"How do you know all of this?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I think I may be some sort of a Seer. Granted, it's very limited and I can only see things about Voldemort and when I'm asleep, but either way, it doesn't hurt to be careful."

Now Cedric had a very serious choice to make. He could ignore Harry, chalking it up to the paranoia that Harry was rumored to have developed (although all things considered, it would be surprising if he hadn't). In fact, so famed was Harry's paranoia that students had labeled Harry Moody's protégé.

On the other hand, Harry could be right. He seriously doubted it, but no one was around to see him make a fool of himself and it was better to be safe than sorry. Feeling a bit silly, Cedric picked up a rock and lightly tossed it at the Cup. It promptly vanished.
I know soul bonds aren't canonical.

Blearily, Hermione opened her eyes.

"Hermione!" Harry cried, overjoyed. "You're awake!"

"You're awfully cheerful," Hermione said, sitting up and turning to face him.

"Well, yeah, I mean for one thing, I no longer have to crusade against blatant inconsistencies and ridiculous conclusions and traditions by myself," Harry told her.

"It's good to know I've been missed," Hermione smiled wryly.

"Of course you have! Have you ever tried to explain the concept of 'cause and effect' to Ron?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"You said for one thing, what else are you so happy about?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Well, I found the Chamber of Secrets, killed the Basilisk, saved Ginny, got Soul Bonded with her—"

"Wait, what?" Hermione asked, with a vague feeling of apprehension.

"Ginny and I got Soul Bonded, isn't that great?" Harry repeated, beaming.

"What does that entail, exactly?" Hermione asked carefully, avoiding the question.

"Well," Harry paused. "I haven't really thought about it. Ginny was blushing so hard when she was explaining it to me that I couldn't really ask any questions."

"What did she say?" Hermione was not to be deterred.

"Well, apparently it means that we're married," Harry said casually.

"MARRIED?" Hermione shrieked. Not out of jealousy, mind you, but shock.

"Yep. Guess that means I don't have to worry about dating."

"I don't see how you can be so casual about this," Hermione told him.

Harry shrugged. "Well, there's really nothing I can do about it, and Ginny is Ron's sister, and I like the Weasley's so I finally have a family!"

"But you don't know the first thing about her!" Hermione protested.

"Sure I do. She's the youngest Weasley and only girl, and this is her first year at Hogwarts, and she's in Gryffindor, and she's had a thing for me forever..." Harry trailed off and sighed. "Just
think. Virginia Potter…"

"Um, Harry?"

Harry looked over at her. "Yes?"

"Her name's Ginevra, not Virginia."

"Oh." There was an awkward silence. "She's cute, though. And she seemed excited."

"Well of course she's excited. She's just fulfilled every little girl's dream: to marry Harry Potter," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"Well I'm excited, too," Harry crossed his arms. "I now have a family."

"Harry, I get that you're lonely, but you don't need to get married; the Weasley's have already practically adopted you!"

Harry still looked skeptical.

'Dear Lord,' Hermione thought. 'What kind of people raised him?'

"You know how Ginny's family is very, er, protective?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah…"

"Well, what do you think they would do if they found out that their precious little sister/daughter was married before she's old enough to eat off the adult's menu?"

Harry paled slightly.

"Exactly," Hermione nodded, satisfied.

"Well…we can keep it a secret!" Harry finished on a sudden burst on inspiration.

"Then what is the point of being married?"

"Well…maybe she can access my Gringotts vault and I can be considered 'of age' and so I can access my full inheritance and not just my trust fund and I can use magic whenever I want without it being tracked and I can learn to Apparate."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "What makes you think that you have a trust fund and that isn't just your entire fortune?"

"Because then Malfoy would be richer than me," Harry said crossly. "And that can't happen."

"But has anyone at Gringotts ever SAID that it's your trust fund and you have any other vaults out there?"

"Well…no," Harry admitted. "But if I can't access my trust fund for a few more years than they wouldn't tell me, would they?"

"You'd think they'd at least mention it…And either way, you should ask the goblins rather than just assuming that they do. As to the Apparition, you'd still have to learn how to do it. The reason you have to be seventeen to get your license is to make sure that you can do it safely."

Harry made a noise that clearly indicated. 'Pah! Safety!' He had never been too concerned with
And the Ministry puts traces on you manually that is not removed until you physically turn seventeen and getting married doesn't count as your two ages combining. Also, if you want to give Ginny money, because I think that your...soul mate...gaining access to your vault is, at least, is something that would occur, why can't you just give it to her without having her take it herself?" Hermione asked him.

"Because the Weasley's NEVER take charity," Harry explained. "Duh."

"But the fact that she would get it if you two accidentally married is different...how?"

"Because she's legally entitled to it," came Harry's answer.

"I'm not so sure about that..." Hermione trailed off.

"Why not? You said that as my soul mate she would get access to my vault, how is that not legally entitled?"

"Well, how would the goblins know that you were...bonded?" Hermione asked sensibly.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, I guess I figured that they would just sense it or something?"

Hermione closed her eyes tightly as she felt a headache coming on. Honestly, she had JUST woken up from being petrified for months. "SENSE it Harry? Why would they be able to do that?"

"So...it would be convenient and enable us to not have to alert any adults who might arrest me for getting myself bonded with an eleven-year-old girl and, more importantly, her parents?" Harry suggested.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, that sounds like the plot of a bad romance novel."

"How would you know what a bad romance novel sounds like?" Harry asked curiously.

Hermione groaned. "Lavender and Parvati read them to each other in the girl's dormitory. Why do you think I never do homework up there? Fred and George are less distracting and psychologically damaging that Nora Roberts."

"Who?" Harry asked puzzled.

"Don't ask. And for that matter, how do you even know that you're...soul bonded?" Hermione was really unsettled by the idea of her friend being married before he even began puberty.

"We can communicate telepathically now!" Harry told her, elated again.

"So you two have been talking since you got back from the Chamber?"

"Well...no, she's been sleeping through most of it," Harry admitted.

"Harry, this isn't good. I mean, you barely know this girl. I'm willing to bet that the conversation you had concerning your Soul Bond has got to be the longest that you've ever spoken. She can barely stand to be in your presence and her first instinct is to run screaming from the room, or at least faint," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," Harry nodded. "But now that we're Soul Bonded, we won't have to worry about that."
"…How do you figure that?" Hermione asked diplomatically.

"Well, I thought that even though it'll be awkward at first, maybe we'd get to talk when we go home for the summer, and I can help her get over her nightmares that somehow no one in her very large, close-nit, privacy-ignoring family will have noticed despite the fact that I'm hardly qualified to deal with such matters and she will eventually realize that she really loves me and I'll realize that I really love her, and she can curse the Dursely's for making me do all of the house-and-yard work and I'll get to observe daily life at the Weasley's and we can fall even deeper in love."

Hermione took a moment to compose herself, for fear she'd end up laughing hysterically if she didn't. "Harry," she said slowly. "You don't even know if you like her."

"Of course I do!" Harry said indigantly. "She's my wife!"

"You didn't even know her first name until a minute ago," Hermione pointed out.

"Well…that's what the summer's for," Harry said optimistically. "Getting to know her."

"But how do you know that you'll like her?" Hermione repeated her earlier inquiry.

"How could I not like her? She's a Weasley!"

"So is Percy," Hermione reminded him.

"Hm…That's a good point, actually…But come on, she likes me, how bad could she be?"

"She has a Harry Potter scrapbook," Hermione said flatly.

"That bad, huh?" Harry winced. "Well…I guess I'll just have to show her the real me."

"What if she doesn't like you?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked hurt. "What are you implying?"

Right, self-esteem issues. "Nothing, nothing…Out of curiosity, however, could you tell me how your bond formed."

Harry considered. "I think it was when I killed the Basilisk, stabbed the diary, and saved her life."

Hermione felt that she was probably missing something, but decided that it was probably best not to get distracted. "So…you save her life and now you're married? Wouldn't that mean that I'd be married to you, too? Because you saved my life with the troll…Oh, and so I'd be married to Ron. And you indirectly save the life of every muggle-born in the school? And you saved Hagrid's life, there's no way he could survive for very long in Azkaban. And what about Professor Snape and your Father? Oh, and he saved you, too! And—"

Harry, looking rather nauseated, quickly cut her off. "Ah yes, but apparently there have only been nine other Soul Bonds in the history of magic."

"And how do you know that? Wait, stupid question. What I meant was: How did Ginny know that?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess that's just the sort of thing that Purebloods know."

"But the Weasley's don't seem the type to care about Pureblood traditions like that," Hermione pointed out.
"Well, I don't know what to tell you."

"And if Soul Bonds are so rare, why did you two get bonded?" Hermione quickly pressed her advantage.

"Um, I think Ginny said it only happened when the person who saves someone's life is in love with them and vice versa."

"In love?" Hermione sputtered. "But you're 12! She's 11! And you still don't actually know anything but basic facts about each other!"

"Well," Harry admitted reluctantly, looking at the floor to hide his red face. "There was also something about us being two halves of the same soul."

"...What?"

"You heard me," Harry said, somewhat defiantly.

And with good reason. "Harry, if you're two halves of the same soul, then how did you get in two separate bodies? A boy and a girl? Only one year apart? And for that matter, how do you even go about splitting a soul in the first place? And, what's more, if you are both two halves of the same soul, wouldn't that mean that you're married to yourself? And isn't that, oh I don't know, incest?"

Harry paled. "NO!"

"I'm just saying..."

"NO!"

"Okay, okay...But Harry, what about privacy? Surely you don't want to share everything with Ginny," Hermione said reasonably.

"I don't see why not. I mean, isn't that the basis for any healthy relationships? No secrets and the ability to know every single thing that the other is thinking and/or feeling?" Harry asked innocently.

"I...don't even know how to respond to that. But let it be known that you have horrible guardians."

Harry snorted. "Preaching to the choir, Hermione."

"And what about when you get a crush on someone else? Won't that be kind of awkward if you're married already?"

Harry stared at her. "Why would I have a crush on anyone else when I have Ginny?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'm just saying, when you hit puberty it is a DISTINCT possibility."

Harry shook his head. "Nope, not gonna happen, I love Ginny and she loves me and so I'm not ever gonna like anyone but her, hormones be damned."

"But what if Ginny gets a crus—" Hermione began.

"Can't you just be happy for me?" Harry begged.

Hermione looked at him for a long moment. "Fine," she said. "But if you don't stop acting like a
Wizard by the end of the week, there will be hell to pay. Remember: Logic is your friend, no matter what your hormones say. And for that matter I can't believe you have hormones already. You're not even thirteen!"

Harry and Ginny were, initially very happy together. Well, until Ginny started paying so much attention to Harry's lessons (which were always infinitely more interesting than hers apparently) and so little to her own that she was put on academic probation.

And then there was the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match. The Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang, smiled at Harry before the match and almost immediately Harry was doubled over in pain. It took about twenty minutes before Harry had recovered enough to start the game.

"And what was that all about?" Hermione asked him later that night.

"What was what about?" Harry asked innocently.

"Oh don't give me that," Hermione said disgustedly. "While you have occasionally had random scar-pains, you've never had a random side-pain. And then you were fine to play! And while I think that that was just a little bit irresponsible on the part of Madame Hooch, the point is: What happened?"

"Well…I kind of…maybe…have a crush on Cho," Harry muttered, looking anywhere but at her.

Resisting the strong urge to say 'I told you so', Hermione prompted. "And?"

"And?" Harry echoed.

"Yes, Harry, and," Hermione said a little impatiently. She knew he was being difficult on purpose, probably because he knew she'd been right. "Developing a crush on someone does not usually cause debilitating pain."

"It does if your soul mate happens to feel that crush."

"Ah."

"Ah? That's all you have to say? Ah?" Harry demanded. "I can never like anyone ever again with Ginny trying to kill me!"

"She didn't try to kill you," Hermione defended Ginny automatically. "At least, I think she didn't…"

"No," Harry grudgingly admitted. "But she will!"

"Well, I hate to say it, but I did warn you…"

"Yeah…" Harry said, suddenly sounding depressed. "Hey, what do you suppose the wizarding position on divorce is?"

"Downright medieval." Harry groaned. "And what do you want a divorce for? I thought you loved her?"

"I do," Harry assured her. "It's just…It'd be nice to not be subjected to emotional scrutiny concerning the girls around me until after my hormones have settled down."

"Remember, Harry, you're not legally married, so I don't think that there IS anything you can do
"Remember, Harry, you're not legally married, so I don't think that there IS anything you can do about this..." Hermione told him regretfully.

"My teenage years are really going to suck, aren't they?" Harry moaned, his head buried in his hands.

"Probably," Hermione shrugged. "But most people's do. And I'm sure that even though you'll have a rough couple of years, sooner or later things will settle down and you and Ginny will be very happy together."

"Or we'll die trying," Harry said, grinning.

Just then there was a knock on the Common Room door.

"Who could that be?" Hermione asked, perplexed. There really weren't many people without passwords attempting to enter the Gryffindor Common Room.

To her surprise, Harry jumped up. "Oh, that'll be Cho."

"Cho?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Yeah, we're going to go take a walk along the lake, I just need to grab my Invisibility Cloak..." Harry said, running off to his dormitory.

When he returned, Hermione asked, "Harry, are you sure this is the best idea? I mean, what about what we just talked about?"

"What about it? Like you said, I've got years before I can possibly be expected to stay with someone for the rest of my life and besides, it's not even a legal union."

"But...aren't you worried about Ginny killing you?" Hermione tried one last time.

Harry nodded. "Yes, actually," he said, surprisingly thoughtful. Then he grinned. "Oh, but what a way to go..."
The whispering started the minute Harry walked into the Great Hall. He heard snippets about Justin, the snake, the Heir of Slytherin, and surprisingly-Lockhart. Not that the fact that Lockhart was mentioned was surprising, he was there, after all, but the talk about him seemed to be more of the awe-struck and enamored variety than anything else.

Harry sat down at the Gryffindor table and listened to the rumors growing over the next twenty minutes. It started with him 'attacking' Justin and was steadily progressing to the point where people were pitying 'Poor Professor Quirrell' who had apparently given his life in a noble attempt to try and stop Harry from stealing the Philosopher's Stone last year. Needless to say, this was news to him.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. Well, he could, he supposed, but he decided not to. This was absolutely ridiculous. He stood on his chair and cleared his throat. "Right, that's enough," he said loudly and everyone turned to stare at him.

"I'm sure you all have heard about what happened in the Dueling Club last night." It wasn't a question but several people nodded enthusiastically anyway, clearly hoping to get some juicier information. Well, they were certainly going to get it. "And first things first, I would like to apologize to Justin."

Justin, who Ernie had convinced to hide under the Hufflepuff table when Harry began speaking, poked his head up, confused.

"I know I had no right to do what I did Justin, so I hope that someday you can find it somewhere within your heart to forgive me for my heinous crime of—" at this Harry took a deep shuddering breath, "saving your life in a foreign language."

"Saving…saving my life in a foreign language?" Justin repeated. "Parseltongue is not a 'foreign language!'" he protested.

"Then what do you call it?" Harry asked. "I mean, I think we can all agree that it is a language, and it is not one that is most people here can speak. If that's not a foreign language, than I'm not sure what is."

"That's not the problem," Ernie spoke up. "It's the fact that Salazaar Slytherin was also a Parselmouth."

"So…let me get this straight. Someone who died over a thousand years ago could speak to snakes and I can speak to snakes. Why does anything think that there's a connection?" Harry asked.

"Well, it's really rare, Harry," Hermione told him.

"So rare that only one family can speak it? And even if that were the case, maybe Slytherin had relatives who could also speak to snakes and I'm descended from one of them," Harry pointed out.

"Then why wouldn't they have come forward?" Ernie asked.

"Because you people crucify anyone who does?" Harry suggested.

"Crucify?" Ernie repeated blankly.

"Never mind," Harry said dismissively. "And why would I want to kill Muggle-borns anyway?"
"I heard that you hate the Muggles you live with," Ernie replied.

"Where did you hear that?" Harry asked incredulously. Ernie looked at Ron, who was smiling sheepishly. "I've got to stop telling you things."

"So is it true?" Ernie asked.

"Of course it is," Harry said calmly. Half of the Great Hall gasped, as if their worst fears were just confirmed. "Oh come on, that doesn't mean anything," Harry said rolling his eyes.

"But if you hate all Muggles, then wouldn't it follow that you'd hate all Muggle-borns? You know, logically?" Justin tried. Unfortunately, fear seemed to be affecting his logic abilities.

"Well, it might, if I hated all Muggles. But when did I ever say that?" Harry asked.

"You just—" Ernie began.

"Said that I hated my relatives," Harry interrupted. "And considering that most of the students here are teenagers, is that really so strange? I mean, maybe because you only see them for three months and maybe a week or two in December, but other than that…"

Hermione, who was sticking to moral rather than vocal support this time because she didn't particularly care to stand on her chair and make a spectacle of herself as Harry was doing, nudged him, reminding him to stay on task.

"But that's not the point," Harry continued hurriedly. "The point is that I do not hate all Muggles. I hate my relatives. I have no doubt that every single person here, except, perhaps Filch, would hate living with them." Harry suddenly remembered that Filch's Squib status was more-or-less a secret.

"And even that would only be because my Aunt Petunia is obsessed with cleanliness. My relatives, as they certainly aren't my family, are manophobic."

People looked questioningly at him.

"I'm pretty sure that means fear of magic. Not positive, though," Harry explained. "But I think that my uncle, at least, has more of a hatred for magic than a fear. After all, if he were truly afraid then he wouldn't dare to lock me in a cupboard every night and every time I annoy them. While on bad days, that just means I'm in the same room as he is and breathing, it can also extend to any time I say anything that is considered 'not normal' (such as a dream I've had, a cartoon I've watched, or a book I've read) or whenever I did some accidental magic. While I suppose I should be grateful that they never actually tried to 'beat the magic' out of me, it's difficult sometimes. Particularly when I think about how they routinely let Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge, use me as a chew toy for her dog and just look on laughing when they chase me up a tree. And before anyone asks why I haven't defended myself, that dog is huge and I was four the first time it happened.

"My Aunt swung a frying pan at my head every morning. They ingrained their son with the belief that I'm a freak and as he's a bully, he invented a game called 'Harry Hunting' where he and his gang would chase me until they caught me and then beat me up. And yes, I think the combination of my Aunt, my Cousin Dudley, and my Uncle just attempting to hit me whenever I did something he didn't like (such as what I listed earlier) helped develop my reflexes to the point where I was the youngest Seeker in a century. I've never understood why, exactly, first years can't have their own brooms, though…"

"I'm also not entirely certain that my relatives know my name, as they always refer to me as 'boy' or 'freak' and I didn't know my parents names until Hagrid showed up and started talking about Lily and James Potter. And while ten years of that is pretty powerful motivation to hate my
relatives, it doesn't mean that I hate all Muggles. I mean, those have got to be the worst sort of people out there, the child abusers, and mark my word, the minute I'm sure Voldemort's dead and I don't have to worry about people trying to kill me in the vain hope that that will somehow bring him back to life (I mean, really, don't you people know ANYTHING about necromancy?), I intend to press charges, whether it be in the Muggle or Wizarding world. On the one hand, me being famous will probably work in my favor, but in the Muggle world I wouldn't have to deal with Professor Dumbledore, who is apparently a high-ranking government official, trying to get them leniency because they 'didn't know any better', 'took you in even if they did treat you worse than a dog', or 'to save my career', although I imagine that that last one wouldn't be explicitly stated."

Everyone was looking horrified now, whether because of his treatment at the hands of his relatives or because he dared to suggest that the headmaster might not be perfect.

"Either way, that doesn't mean that I hate all Muggles," Harry repeated, ignoring the rather predictable reactions. "I'm sure that there are good and bad Muggles just like there are good and bad wizards. Granted I've never actually met any decent Muggles, but then, perhaps I'm not being fair. The only Muggles I've been in close contact with would be my neighbors on Privet Drive, who are all extremely xenophobic (which I'm positive means fearful of foreign or strange things) and my classmates. The neighbors were also told that anything that Dudley did wrong, which was quite a lot as he was a bully to put Draco Malfoy to shame, was my fault and were also filled with a bunch of crap about how I was mentally ill and seriously disturbed, which my relatives seemed to think was more respectable than just saying I was shy or not saying anything and hoping I didn't do magic in front of them. But hey, even if I did, they wouldn't have believed it. My classmates couldn't be nice to me or else Dudley would beat them up and while their cowardice appalls me, that might just be because I'm a Gryffindor and thus tend to be a bit reckless. But I still believe that there must be good Muggles. Somewhere. Otherwise there would be no Magical/Muggle intermarriage, would there?"

Harry paused. "Although if you're considering it, I'm recommend telling them before you get married and definitely before one of you is pregnant because if you're that scared of their reaction, then chances are they won't make your married life or your child's life very pleasant. And it really wouldn't matter if I did hate all Muggles indiscriminately or not."

"It wouldn't?" Ron managed to ask, as everyone else was speechless.

"Nope," Harry said cheerfully. "I mean, it would in general, but not in the case of 'Is Harry Potter attempting to cleanse the school of Muggle-borns?'

"Why wouldn't it matter?" Ernie asked. "If you hated all Muggles then-"

"That doesn't necessarily mean I would hate Muggle-borns. After all, Muggle-borns are unlikely to hate me because I can do magic. Mostly because they can do it too, but still. Also, my best friend is Hermione Granger, a Muggle-born." Ron opened his mouth to protest. "And yes, I say 'best friend' and not 'one of my best friends' because I'm currently annoyed at Ron perpetuating the rumor that I'm out to kill half the school just because my relatives are horrible people. And what about my Mother? Not only was she Muggle-born but she gave her life to save me. And it really wouldn't matter if I did hate all Muggles indiscriminately or not."

"But…but Collin Creevy annoyed you and then he was petrified! And Filch yelled at you and just look at his cat!" Ernie protested. After all, he'd been one of the more vocal supports for the 'Potter the Petrifier' theory and he didn't want to look stupid. That and he was rather pompous and liked
all the attention everyone was paying him while he was publically arguing with Harry.

"Filch yells at everyone, I didn't take it personally. As for Collin annoying me...so he did," Harry allowed. "However I'm not so stupid as to attack someone when it is widely known that he is coming to visit me. And besides, Lockhartannoys me more than anyone else in the castle put together. And yes, that includes Professor Snape, who seems incapable of understanding the simple fact that I am not my father and can't seem to get through one class without verbally abusing me and reminding me painfully of my relatives."

Dumbledore shot Snape a look and opened his mouth to rebuke him. Before he could say anything, though, Hermione found her voice. "What could you possibly have against Professor Lockhart, Harry? He's a genius."

Harry snorted. "A marketing genius, perhaps. Although I'm still not sure if that's the case of if the wizarding world isn't just populated by idiots."

Several offended shouts of "Hey!" were heard.

"To be fair, you people were entertaining the idea that I was so evil that Voldemort had to go and get rid of the competition for Dark Lord by the time I was fifteen months old. I mean, no one figured Damien out until he was, what, six? And he was the bloody Antichrist."

"Stop making Muggle references, Potter," Draco Malfoy told him, annoyed.

"Not until I get an apology from everyone who accused me of trying to kill all Muggle-borns," Harry replied petulantly.

"About Professor Lockhart, Harry," Hermione prompted.

"Oh, right. Well, remember the first lesson, on Cornish Pixies?" Hermione nodded. "Well if he's such an expert at Defense, why he run screaming from the room when faced with creatures that were EIGHT INCHES TALL?"

"He did not run screaming from the room," Hermione corrected them. "He just told the three of us to deal with them. Great hands-on experience."

"Maybe he just 'walked briskly', but he was definitely leaving three twelve-year-olds to deal with a roomful of magical creatures armed only with a faulty spell and the fact that Hermione's a genius."

Hermione blushed. "So maybe the spell didn't work exactly the way it was supposed to—"

"It didn't do anything," Harry countered. "And what about before that? That quiz he gave us? What does his favorite color or what he wants for his birthday have to do with anything?"

"He wanted to make sure we read the books," Hermione insisted.

"What did the books teach us? That he was an arrogant wanker who's more obsessed with his hair than saving people."

"Look what he's done in his books, though!" Hermione told him, wondering why the staff was putting a stop to Harry's blasphemy. In truth, the professors generally hated Gilderoy, and so they were willing to ignore the disturbance. Lockhart himself was too busy curling his hair to appear in the Great Hall to defend himself.

"As Ron so eloquently put it after the Cornish Pixie fiasco, 'He says he's done.' Honestly, his
books read more like a Mary Sue story. And have you noticed he doesn't really go into specifics about HOW he's defeated the monster? He just says that he's done it. You'd think that the how would matter, but he can't be bothered to supply it."

"Maybe he thinks it would bore his readers," Hermione suggested.

"Then it should be set as the Defense against the Dark Arts textbook," Harry said triumphantly. "And is there any proof that he's actually done of the things he says he has? I mean, he seems pretty incompetent from what I've seen, can't manage to perform the disarming spell (which I've since mastered), and can't even be counted on to hold his wand without dropping it. And none of the people from the villages he's saved is too clear on what happened either."

"Well maybe they weren't there," Hermione sniffed.

"He's never had a witness to his 'heroic deeds' ever? Does anyone actually think that that sounds like him?" A few particularly dedicated fangirls raised their hands, but other than that nobody moved. "And Lockhart literally told me that he was more famous than me because he won some kind of smiling contest five times in a row."

"And what a smile…" Hermione said dreamily.

"Focus, Hermione," Harry snapped. "Now, as much as I hate to disillusion you, I know you'd do the same for me. Tell me one impressive thing you've see Lockhart do. Ever."

"I…" Hermione said faintly, searching for something. She came up empty. "I bet he's too modest."

Ron snorted. "Right."

Hermione glared at him and he quickly busied himself with his breakfast.

"If that's the case then he wouldn't have written a whole series of books about it. And if he isn't going to do anything impressive or at least mediocre, he shouldn't be attempting to teach. I've heard from some of the older students that they've had to get a new Defense Professor every year and apparently that's been going of for years. Either the job's cursed or else people just think it is and so therefore I bet Lockhart was the only idiot who applied."

Everyone looked to Dumbledore for confirmation, but he was pointedly staring at the Great Hall ceiling.

Harry took that to mean a yes. "And he can't get it through his head that I don't like attention. Sometimes it's necessary, though, such as when you need to curtail the mass stupidity that is people thinking you would waste time attacking Muggle-borns who have never done anything to you when Lockhart is right there and SO much more tempting. Am I right?"

Most of the guys and a few of the more sensible girls agreed loudly.

"I…but…his books!" Hermione said desperately.

"Hermione, you've read all the books on me, right?" Harry asked gently. She nodded. "Is there anything in those that aren't true?"

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "No, I suppose you didn't become a Vampire Prince, or get engaged to a Veela, or became a gay muggle hitman by the time you were five."

Harry stared at her. "They…they really say that kind of stuff?"
"You have no idea," Ron told him.

"And doesn't that go to show that just because it's in a book that doesn't make it right?" Hermione looked torn. "Hermione!"

"I...Oh all right...So...you really think Professor Lockhart is a fraud, then?" she asked despondently.

"YES."

"He's still hot, though," an older girl piped up.

"Be that as it may, he's not being paid to serve as eye candy." Harry paused. "And that is not confirmation that I'm gay, by the way!"
"How?" Harry demanded. "How are we going to check?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, then paused. She said nothing, just stood there, thinking.

"Well?" Harry asked. "I don't have all day, you know. Sirius is being tortured RIGHT NOW."

"Well…" Hermione said slowly. "I was going to suggest using Umbridge's fire to see if we could contact them, but then I realized that that has got to be the worst idea I've had since I decided to no contact you all summer, even though we were only told not to tell you anything important that could be intercepted and were free to send you cursory greetings." Harry glared at her. "I should mention it was Ron's idea." Harry turned the power of his glare to Ron, who glared at Hermione for tattling, who glared at Harry for acting like a wizard and waving her well-thought-out arguments aside simply by virtue of yelling loudly and giving her a headache.

"And who said that's a dumb idea? I think it's brilliant!" Ron told her. When he saw Harry's hand twitching for his wand, he quickly amended, "I was talking about the using the floo in Umbridge's office idea, not the shun Harry for being a prefect and not me plan."

"But…I wasn't a prefect you were," Harry pointed out.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well, I know that now. But seeing as how you're the only student Dumbledore's actually on a first name basis with, you can understand how I might have gotten that impression."

"I thought you didn't want to be a Prefect," Ginny told him, eyes wide. "At least that's what you told Fred and George."

"Well, of course I said that," Ron replied, as if it were obvious. "You saw what they did to Percy once he got the badge."

Ginny shuddered. "Fair enough."

"Wait, what happened?" Harry asked curiously.

"He couldn't leave Mum's sight all summer," Ginny explained. "Whenever he tried, the twins pranked him."

"How did they find out so quickly?" Hermione asked. "We didn't find out until August."

"Well, we didn't know…officially," Ron admitted. "But seeing as how Oliver Wood was the only other Gryffindor guy in his year, there wasn't really much suspense, was there?"

Harry wondered vaguely how Wood would react to finding out that was supposed to be up at all hours of the night patrolling the castle and not resting up for Quidditch. "It would definitely mean later practices…” he muttered absently.

Everyone stared at him.

"…Right then," Ginny finally said. "So as I was saying, Percy may have been safe from the twins, but spending that much time with Mum definitely had its effect on Percy and his personality underwent a complete transformation. He got all…responsible." She shuddered again.
"So he wasn't always like that?" Hermione asked.

Ron laughed. "Where'd you get that idea? If Mum knew how to raise us to be like that, do you honestly think Bill would have gone to Egypt or Charlie to Romania? Or the twins been the twins? Merlin, no. I mean, maybe if she had more time and less children, but as it is, Percy only got like that after that summer of following Mum around."

"Hey," Hermione said, just realizing something. "I was a Prefect, too. Why didn't you shun me?"

"Because I couldn't possibly have gotten your Prefect position, now could I have? You're a girl and I'm not," Ron pointed out.

"And you thought that by shunning Harry, you'd get to be Prefect instead?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" Ron asked rhetorically.

Hermione had to reign in a powerful desire to just hex him on the spot for the utter absurdity of that line of thinking.

"So why didn't the twins prank you every two seconds or you turn into Percy Jr.?" Harry asked.

"Well, after that row Dad had with Percy, I didn't think that turning out like that would be appreciated, so I did the honorable thing." Harry waited expectantly, but Ron did not go on.

"He hid behind me," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"Her bat-bogeys are scary!" Ron defended.

"But…she's underage!" Harry protested. "How could she have threatened the twins with that outside of Hogwarts?"

Ginny snorted. "Like that'd stop me."

"But wouldn't you get in trouble with the Ministry?" Harry asked. "I mean, maybe no one would put you on trial in front of the entire Wizengamet, but you'd at least get a letter, right?"

"Screw the rules, I'm a Pureblood," Ginny said by way of explanation.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "Households in which at least one magical adult resides are exempt from such pesky things as restrictions for underage magic."

"It's because magical guardians are supposed to police their children and/or assorted wards," Neville explained.

"It's because the laws were written by Purebloods," Luna said serenely.

"I…have to agree with Luna," Hermione said faintly.

"Are you feeling okay?" Harry asked, concerned.

"I-I think so," Hermione replied hesitantly. "But I don't understand how I just agreed with Luna."

"Well, don't worry too much about it," Harry reassured her. "It's probably just a freak occurrence. Besides, I've still got a godfather to rescue."
Hermione cursed silently. She'd been trying to distract him from that as she still wasn't convinced that this was anything but a bad dream.

"Yeah, you never got around to telling us what was so stupid about the floo plan," Ron reminded her.

"You mean, other than the fact that we can't realistically expect Sirius to be sitting in front of the fireplace just waiting for someone to call, especially as he's been complaining that no one will visit him?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, aside from that," Ron nodded, completely serious.

"Well, there's always the fact that with Fred and George already gone we don't have anyone high-profile enough to use as a scapegoat to distract Umbridge and even if we did, we can't possibly condone people sacrificing their education right when they need it the most," Hermione said vehemently.

"You let Fred and George do it," Ginny pointed out.

"Well, to be fair, they weren't exactly getting the most out of it anyway. Plus they chose to pursue one of the few careers that don't require any NEWTs and were planning on being driven out of Hogwarts anyway, so no, I didn't really see a problem with it," Hermione admitted.

"Not to mention it was for a good cause," Ron chimed in.

"Ron, Harry insisted on contacting his fugitive godfather immediately rather than write the only non-fugitive close friend of his father's in order to ask if he was really a bully twenty years ago," Hermione told him impatiently. "That's hardly what I'd call a pressing matter."

"I stand by my decision," Harry said, crossing his arms stubbornly.

"Of course you do," Hermione sighed. "Not to mention that she knows that her office has been broken into in the past and so she's probably set something up let her know if we try and use her floo to communicate with the outside world."

"Why would she do that?" Ron asked.

"Because if word of how she's declared Martial Law on Hogwarts got out, she'd be out of here so fast her head would spin," Harry explained. "Why else would she censor the mail?" He turned to Hermione. "And if you don't want me sneaking into Umbridge's office again, which I suppose I can understand, how do you suggest I try and reach Sirius?"

Hermione sighed. "I suppose that it would be too much to hope that you could go and ask Professor Snape to contact him, seeing as how he's a member of the Order of the Phoenix and thus probably has a more reliable method of communicating with him and he has proven himself by saving your life time and time again even though he hates you and would do what you ask just so you wouldn't run off and into a trap?"

"Yes, yes it would," Harry nodded. "He hates my father, Remus, and Sirius and despite the fact that I'm beginning to suspect that that's completely justified, I can never forgive him for that. Besides, Luna says that he's involved in the Rotfang Conspiracy."

"It's always the greasy ones," Ron said sagely.

"Oy vey," Hermione groaned. "The saying is 'it's always the quiet ones, Ron."
"Well, Professor Snape looks like a bat and bat's are quiet," Neville volunteered.

Hermione glared at him. "Not helping!"

"Sorry," he apologized. "I couldn't resist."

"I don't know what else you could do," Hermione confessed. "But I know that you can't just walk into a trap in Umbridge's office; you might as well just go to the Ministry of Magic and you probably wouldn't be in any more danger."

"So, let's go then," Harry said, starting to walk towards the exit.

Hermione's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Harry…I know you've already said that you're sure, but how do you know that your dream is really happening."

"Dumbledore said—"

Hermione interrupted him. "Very little to you this you and you know it. You're interpreting what he said to mean that and I'll admit, I don't know how else you could have saved Mr. Weasley, but Harry…At Christmas, you said that Voldemort realized that you were in his mind that night, right?"

"Right," Harry agreed. "And?"

"And if Professor Snape can trick Voldemort into thinking he's loyal—" Ron coughed loudly so Hermione reluctantly added, "Or Professor Dumbledore, both of whom are supposed to be really skilled Legilimens, then surely Voldemort can send Harry false images. And Harry, you say you've been dreaming about that door for months? Why?"

"It's the door to the Department of Mysteries," Harry said.

"So? Does that mean anything to you? What do you know about the Department of Mysteries?" Hermione pressed.

"Nothing," Harry admitted.

"So why would you dream about it?" Hermione asked sensibly.

"Because I couldn't remember where I'd seen that door before?" Harry suggested.

Hermione stared at him incredulously. "Harry, while I would totally do just that, I have to express some doubt that you would. I mean, come on, are you really that anal?"

"Well…no, but—" Harry began.

"But nothing. Now, for whatever reason, Voldemort has decided that he wants to pretend that he doesn't exist. That means making very few public appearances and it certainly means no going to the Ministry of Magic."

"Maybe he's just an idiot?" Ron suggested.

"Who's an idiot?" Neville asked.

"You-Know-Who."

"No, who—" Neville started to ask.
"He means Voldemort," Hermione explained, grateful that she had bitten the bullet and finally just started calling Riddle by his chosen name. "And how would he have even gotten Sirius, anyway? He's under the Fidelius Charm and surely he wouldn't just up and leave and get captured. I mean, he's got to be more responsible than that."

Hermione sounded a little uncertain about that last part, but Harry wasn't about to exploit that as he kind of resented her lack of faith in his godfather.

"And," she continued. "There have got to be other people who are easier to kidnap that you would come running for. Like Remus…or Mrs. Weasley."

"I guess, but maybe a Death Eater was in charge of hostage taking. No one ever accused them of being geniuses," Harry pointed out.

"True," Hermione conceded. "But then how do you suppose they managed to lure your godfather out of Grimmauld Place?" Harry had no answer and Hermione was quick to press her advantage. "And what would he have needed Sirius to get that he couldn't have gotten himself?"

"The Hall of Prophecies is located in the Department of Mysteries," Luna said dreamily.

"That's nice Luna," Hermione said absently. "Now, do you have an answer, Harry?"

Harry didn't, so he chose to stall for time. "What was that, Luna?"

"The prophecies can't be lifted by anyone except those whom the prophecies are about," Luna continued in the same ethereal voice.

Harry froze. "The weapon."

"Pardon?" Hermione asked, not following his train of thought.

"That's it, that's the weapon! They were guarding the door to the Hall of Prophecies! It's a prophecy about how I'm supposed to defeat Voldemort or something, that's why he came after me! Voldemort wants it to see why he couldn't kill me, maybe he heard it wrong," Harry realized. He paused. "Wait, but if Voldemort were in the Hall of Prophecies, then why would he need Sirius? Couldn't he just lift it himself?"

"He could, except he's not really there," Hermione said, relieved that Harry was beginning to see reason. "He might show up there if all else fails, but he must have been trying to lure you there all year. That's why they wanted you to learn Occulemency. And Professor Dumbledore…He must know what the prophecy says! That's why he's been avoiding you! He's afraid that Voldemort could use your connection to try and use Legillemency on him!" She paused. "That's highly unlikely, but then, Professor Dumbledore has been a wizard for a very long time now, so it's understandable."

"Either way, Hermione, I just wouldn't feel right not going if there's a chance that Voldemort is just an idiot and really has Sirius there," Harry told her.

"Harry, I understand that, I really do, Umbridge's floo is just too dangerous, though. I mean, isn't there any other way you could contact him?" Hermione asked desperately. "I mean, I know it'd be reckless, but Sirius embodies recklessness and I just can't imagine that he'd let you go off to Hogwarts to face all of this without giving you some way to talk to him and let him talk you into doing something stupid."

Harry thought for a minute. "The mirror!"
"What mirror?" Hermione asked. "Harry!" she called as he sprinted from the room, concerned he was about to go sneak off into the Ministry of Magic.

"I'll go with him," Ron volunteered as he ran after him. Needless to say, this did not reassure her.

Hermione needn't have worried, however. Within ten minutes, the two were back and holding what appeared to be an ordinary handheld mirror.

"Sirius gave it to me and right before school started and told me to use it if I ever needed to talk. Apparently he and my dad used to use it during detentions. I decided not to use it because I didn't want to endanger him and then I completely forgot about it. I'm not sure why he didn't ask me about it when contacted him with Umbridge's floo, but maybe that was because Remus was there and didn't know about it," Harry said by way of explanation. "He said he'd keep it with him and let's hope he remembers after all this time."

Harry tapped the mirror. "SIRIUS!" he shouted.

There was a thud and then, to Harry's relief, he heard a familiar voice say "Ow!" and then Sirius's image appeared in the mirror. "Yes Harry?"

"Hey, Sirius, I know this might be a bad time, but I've got a quick question for you. You're not being held captive by Voldemort in the Department of Mysteries, are you?"

Sirius blinked. "You know, that's oddly specific. No, I've never been to the Department of Mysteries. Is this your roundabout way of asking about the prophecy?"

"You knew?" Harry asked, hurt.

Sirius snorted. "Hell, the twins knew."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Harry demanded, trying (and failing miserably) not to sound too betrayed.

"Molly was monitoring anyone she thought might tell you whenever they were alone with you," Sirius explained. "And trust me, she is a scary, scary woman."

"You're telling me..." Ron muttered.

"Sirius," Hermione said, peering over Harry's shoulder into the mirror. "We think that Voldemort is trying to lure Harry into the Department of Mysteries to retrieve the prophecy for him."

"You think?" Sirius laughed. "We've suspected that for the better part of a year."

"No, you don't understand, we mean we think they've set a trap right now," Hermione clarified. "Can you get the Order to go check it out? Because if you don't, you know Harry'll go there personally."

Sirius nodded, suddenly serious. "I'll let them know." His eyes flickered back to Harry. "And you, stay safe," he ordered.

"I will if you will," Harry muttered petulantly.

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Fair enough. On one condition: You contact me using this at least once a week until you graduate."

Harry rolled his eyes mock-annoyed. "Fine..."
"You know," Ginny remarked after Sirius had gone off to alert the Order. We got all fired up to go break into the Ministry and we should probably do something with that pent-up energy. I'm thinking, take down Toad-Lady?"

Later, they would refuse to comment on how exactly they had talked Umbridge into the forest and what, exactly, the centaurs had done to her. Sirius, for his part, fully supported their story of her walking in on them warning Sirius about the trap and, in the wake of Voldemort's return and Sirius's sudden innocence, nobody was inclined to look too closely at what had happened that day. One lasting effect was that the entire herd of centaurs had apparently been inspired to join SPEW and consequently Fudge (who, apparently, thought that centaurs had the power to make up the significance of the stars and planets and have that come to pass), in his last days as Minister, signed much progressive House Elf legislation into law.
"So…do you accept my offer?" Lupin asked. "Will three become four? I cannot believe that Dumbledore would have disapproved, he appointed me your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all. And I must tell you that I believe we are facing magic many of us have never encountered or imagined."

"Um, no offense Remus, but I'm not sure that Dumbledore letting you teach DADA is exactly the greatest qualification in the world," Harry said gently. "I mean, he hired Lockhart after all."

Lupin flushed. "Yes, well, I assure you I'm very qualified. At the very least I'm more qualified than three seventeen-year-olds."

"We acknowledge that." Hermione nodded. "However, you have to remember that you're married now and have responsibilities. You can't just up and leave whenever you feel like it."

"What about you?" Lupin challenged. "What about your parents? Or Ron's family?"

"Hermione modified her parents' memories and sent them to Australia for their own safety," Harry explained. He paused. "I'm sure her intentions were very good, but I still don't think that she had a right to force that on her parents and should have just sat them down and explained things to them, instead of acting like just because they're Muggles they can't be trusted to make their own decisions."

"Harry!" Hermione protested. "That's not-"

"That's exactly how it was, Hermione," Harry disagreed. "But we can argue about that later, right now we have to explain to Remus why he's being unreasonable."

"Alright," Hermione agreed reluctantly. "But this isn't over."

"And my family is all involved in the Order and all support my choice to do this," Ron added. "Well…except for my mother. But she isn't exactly the most reasonable person on the planet. And she still doesn't get that I look horrible in maroon. I mean, we all have the exact same color hair; how hard could it be to get that after seventeen years?" The other three stared at him. "And, um, I'm a legal adult and therefore she should respect my decision."

"How is that any different than me decision to help you?" Lupin asked.

"Because we didn't get anybody pregnant," Harry said pointedly. "I mean, if Ron had gotten Hermione pregnant than I would have made them stay safe and gotten Neville and Luna to help me instead."

"Why not Ginny?" Ron asked.

"Because then breaking up with her would have been even more pointless than it already was," Hermione told him.

"It was not pointless," Harry glared.

"Yes it was," Hermione countered. "She's a Weasley, she's a target. And besides, you could have kept dating and just pretended to break up."

"Well…I guess you're right," Harry admitted. "But in my defense, I was kind of freaking out
because of Dumbledore's death."

"Harry, I'm sure James would have wanted me to stick with you," Lupin interjected, trying to bring the focus back around to him.

"Oh, that is so not fair," Harry objected. "I know nothing about my father; you could say he'd support whatever you happened to choose to do and I'd never know!"

"Well…you don't understand," said Lupin at last.

"No I don't," Harry agreed. "And I look forward to your attempt at an explanation. Let's hope it has more merit than your 'I didn't want to admit that I was an idiot as a teenager and thus put an entire school full of children at risk' explanation for why you neglected to mention Sirius was an Animagus."

"I—I made a grave mistake in marrying Tonks. I did it against my better judgment and I have regretted it very much ever since."

"But I thought you loved her," Hermione said, confused. "Or did she just bully you into dating her?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Lupin said, shaking his head impatiently.

"Then what?" Ron asked, even more confused.

"Don't you understand what I've done to my wife and my unborn child? I should never have married her; I've made her an outcast!" Lupin lamented.

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances.

"Call me crazy, Remus," Hermione said carefully. "But I thought that she was already an outcast. Because her mother married a Muggle-born? Bellatrix Lestrange will probably go after her just for that, plus she's a member of the Order of the Phoenix. I doubt your association has put her in any more danger." She shook her head, annoyed. "Honestly, what is it with guys who make stupid, useless gestures of trying to protect us by breaking up with us when we're in danger anyway?"

She looked at Ron. "If you ever pull something like that, then I swear to God, I WILL make you suffer before I kill you."

Ron gulped. "Understood."

"It's not that simple," Lupin said frantically, pulling at his hair. "You have only seen me amongst the Order, or under Dumbledore's protection at Hogwarts! You don't know how most of the Wizarding world sees creatures like me! When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me! Don't you see what I've done? Even her own family is disgusted with our marriage, what parents want their only daughter to marry a werewolf? And the child—the child—" Lupin swallowed hard. "My kind don't usually breed! It will be like me, I am convinced of it—how can I forgive myself, when I knowingly risked passing on my condition to an innocent child? And if, by some miracle, it is not like me, then it will be better off, a hundred times so, without a father of whom it must always be ashamed!"

"…"

Eventually, Ron said, "Wow. Been wanting to get that off your chest for a while now, huh?"

"Remus," Harry said. "Most of the wizarding world is convinced that I'm a lying, schizophrenic, Dark Lord in training about half of the time, and it looks like now they think I somehow managed
to murder Dumbledore. They would believe that Voldemort was a saint if it were in the Daily Prophet. Just because they don't accept you is no reason to get this upset. I mean, they're all idiots, anyway. And I know that Snape dropped the bomb that you were a werewolf four years ago, but surely not everybody in all of Wizarding Britain knows, and it might help if you didn't go around telling everybody."

"And as far your in-laws are concerned," Hermione spoke up. "I've never met them, but even if they do have some…reservations about Tonks marrying you because you're a werewolf, they're probably also concerned about the fact that they probably don't know you very well, Tonks is their only daughter, you're thirteen years older than her, are chronically unemployed, and extremely fatalistic."

"And let's not forget about your child," Harry reminded him. "If he is a werewolf, then yes, things will be difficult for him, and he may very well resent that fact, but he will eventually realize that it's not your fault that you're a werewolf and will probably appreciate his existence more than he hates being a werewolf and so won't blame you for that. If you abandon him, he will still have the stigma of being a werewolf but he'll also have some self-esteem issues and wonder if he's why you left his mother. Not to mention that it won't be easy on Tonks to raise a werewolf baby as a single mother in the hostile environment that you described. And even if he isn't a werewolf, I'm sure he'd appreciate knowing both of his parents. Your lack of presence wouldn't change the fact that you're a werewolf and it will only serve to make you and Tonks miserable and thus adversely affect him. Besides, why would he be ashamed of you if you were always there and he's never known a father who wasn't a werewolf? That's like saying Bill and Fleur's kids will be ashamed of him for his scars or her for the fact that guys can't stop staring at her."

"That's completely different!" came Lupin's reply.

"Is it?" Harry challenged. "I mean, unless you intend to let him see you when you're transformed, how will he possibly grasp any of the horror behind your condition?"

"Of course I wouldn't!" Lupin snapped. "It's just, I…I don't know. I feel guilty."

"You always feel guilty," Hermione pointed out exasperatedly. "But believe it or not, you are not a blight upon the lives of everyone unfortunate enough to come into contact with you."

"I didn't say that I was."

"But you act like it, and quite frankly, it's getting a little old. YES you being a werewolf means that you're fatigued half the time, YES it means that you're incapacitated once a months and have to be very careful, YES it means that you're up against a lot of prejudice, but then again, who isn't?" Hermione asked rhetorically. "Wizards tend to disparage Muggles and non-human magical creatures, said magical creatures hate wizards, Blood Purists hate Muggle-borns and Blood Traitors, and the so-called Blood Traitors and, well, everyone else hates the Blood Purists. Everyone hates everyone in Wizarding society; it's a wonder that there's only one war threatening to destroy it every generation or so."

"But it's different for werewolves," Lupin tried to explain.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Remus, I've had a twelve-year-old tell me they wanted me to get murdered by Slytherin's monster just because my parents didn't happen to have magic. Tell me that's not messed up."

"That was Malfoy, Hermione, what do you expect?" Ron asked.

"I expected him to at least reach puberty before deciding that he literally wanted me to drop dead."
"So…you won't let me help you?" Lupin asked, aghast.

"Well…" Harry considered. "My initial reaction is no. Parents shouldn't leave their kids unless they have to. But this is a war. We're fighting to ensure that parents DON'T have to, and in order to do that, sometimes people will have to leave. I'm not stupid, I know that plenty of men have left their wives and children behind in order to go off to war and have since the beginning of time."

"So you will let me help?" Lupin asked hopefully.

"I won't let you come with us, no," Harry shook his head. "Because we'll be away from the thick of the action and you'll do more good if you stay here and fight against Voldemort's new regime. Oh! That reminds me. They'll probably take Hogwarts, too, and if I know Ginny, she won't just sit back and do nothing, she'll keep the DA going. Hey, Hermione, do you think you can give Lupin the map to give to Ginny? She'll need it. Even on the off chance that they do leave Hogwarts alone, what good would it do me?"

Hermione nodded and dug through her bag. When she found the map, she gave it to Lupin, who pocketed it.

"That's not to say that you can't help us, though," Harry continued. "I mean, you're right, we're not nearly experienced enough and you were a good DADA teacher, so maybe you can come over and help us learn whatever you think we'll need to know in order to deal with any Death Eaters we come across."

"Hm," Lupin considered. "It will certainly be risky, but I think it'll be worth it. Plus I can bring you news of the outside world."

"Yes, about the risk," Hermione spoke up. "I think we should all agree on a plan to deal with that right now. I mean, we have a good thing going for us here, and if someone managed to follow us back here then, well, I don't know what we'd do. So how about this: whenever anyone is trying to get back here from wherever they are going, make sure you Apparate to five different locations in rapid succession. That way, even if you're being tailed, they won't be able to follow you and Grimmauld Place will remain our safe haven."

The others nodded their agreement, although Harry and Ron looked a little green at the thought of that much Apparation.

"And while we're on the subject of safe communication, do you think you can give this to Ginny, too?" Harry asked, handing Lupin a large shard of a shattered mirror.

Lupin raised his eyebrows. "Certainly. Is this the same mirror that Sirius gave you?"

Harry flushed. "Yeah, it…broke. And I don't want her to not know if I'm alive or not, that wouldn't be fair to her and horrible for morale."

Lupin nodded. "So…is everything settled?" Everyone nodded. "I'll be back in a week then."

And with that, he Apparated back to his wife and unborn child, at least a month away from his next panic attack.
Why we don't listen to talking diaries

"There you are," Ron said, staring at Harry a little oddly and wondering what in the world he could have possibly been doing that made him so out of breath. He quickly became concerned when he saw how pale and shaky his friend was. "What's up?"

"It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago," came Harry's dazed reply.

Ron stared at Harry as if he'd just said he was a Half-Veela who had to mate with Malfoy or die. "…I'll go find Hermione then," he said at last.

Harry nodded dimly and watched as Ron all but flew down the stairs. After a few minutes, he returned practically dragging Hermione behind him.

"What's this about you going crazy, Harry?" she asked, rubbing her wrist.

"I didn't say he was crazy, Hermione," Ron disagreed quickly. "I said that he said that Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets, remember?"

"Right, my mistake," Hermione said sarcastically. "So, Harry, why don't you tell me why you think that Hagrid, of all people, is out to kill all the Muggleborns in the school. Because last time I checked, he and I got on just fine and I've never made my heritage a secret."

Harry shook his head. "You don't get it; it's not that I want to think it's Hagrid, but I've got some pretty damning evidence that says it is."

"And that evidence is...?" Ron prompted, wondering if there was some truth to Harry's theory after all.

"This," Harry said grimly, holding up Riddle's diary.

Hermione peered at it. "You…found Hagrid's diary? Did he confess in it or something? Because let me tell you, I find it highly unlikely that someone would do that and then just leave the incriminating evidence lying around. Are you sure it's not a forgery?"

Harry shook his head again. "I'm not actually sure how to check if it's a forgery or not, but it's not Hagrid's and it's pretty convincing."

"Someone could have just made it up, you know," Ron piped up. "That sounds like something Fred and George might do, although I can't see them blaming Hagrid. Snape, maybe."

"It's an enchanted diary," Harry explained, "belonging to one Tom Marvolo Riddle. Apparently he went to school here fifty years ago during the first wave of attacks and he showed me a memory of how he caught Hagrid."

"If he ended up catching the perpetrator, wouldn't people have made a bigger deal about it?" Hermione asked. "Letting them know that there was no more danger to relieve panic? And if the situation fifty years ago is anything like the situation now, then people would definitely have been panicking."

"Riddle said that the Headmaster was ashamed because a girl died and so forbid him from telling the truth," Harry told her.
"…but everyone must have known about the girl dying, so why wouldn't they have just told the truth?" Hermione asked.

"Because they never found the Chamber and people wouldn't be comfortable sending their students to a school where a bloodthirsty monster could be set loose at any moment," Harry replied.

Hermione sighed. "I suppose you have a point there. Still, Hagrid? I can't believe it. You said he showed you a memory? Do you think he could show us?"

Ron looked at her like she was mental. "You want to go around using a mysterious enchanted diary? My dad works with illegally enchanted things all the time and the one thing he always told me is to never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brains."

"I'm not saying we should trust it," Hermione said placatingly. "Just that we need to see all the evidence if we want to be able to come to an informed decision."

Harry, meanwhile, had picked up his quill again and wrote, "Two of my friends are having a difficult time believing what you told me. I think I'm just really not good at explaining. Would you mind showing them as well?"

Riddle's reply came after a long pause. "Certainly not. After all, the more people who know, the more people who can try and stop this madness before the monster has a chance to kill again. Just have them place their hands on this book and I will show them."

Ron and Hermione did as Riddle asked and Harry watched as their faces became blank as they were drawn into the memory.

When they came back to themselves Ron looked faintly ill and Hermione looked thoughtful.

"I…I guess you're right, Harry. I'm sorry for doubting you," Ron said, his voice shaky.

"That's okay," Harry assured him. "I didn't want to believe it either."

"I'm still not sure I believe it," Hermione declared.

Harry and Ron stared at her.

"How much more proof do you need?" Ron asked, incredulous. "We just saw Riddle catch Hagrid red-handed!"

"No, we saw Riddle catch Hagrid with something that he probably wasn't supposed to have, but we really didn't see what it was. It's just as likely that Riddle made a mistake or was using Hagrid as a convenient scapegoat," Hermione countered.

"How many monsters do you think this place can hold?" Ron demanded.

Hermione snorted. "A lot. This is Hogwarts, after all. Remember how nobody but us seemed to notice the giant Cerberus hiding in the castle last year? Or the troll? Or You-Know-Who?"

"That's different," Ron argued. "Those were all well-hidden."

Hermione laughed. "In a place Dumbledore made sure to draw our attention to by forbidding us to go there! Quite frankly it's a wonder more people didn't discover it. And anyway, don't you think that the 'Chamber of Secrets' might, oh, I don't know, ALSO be well-hidden?"
"Okay, so maybe there are a lot of monsters," Harry butted in as Ron prepared to continue the mini-argument he and Hermione were engaged in. "But if it was a mistake then why would the attacks have stopped after Hagrid was expelled?"

"There are several plausible explanations for that," Hermione said patiently. "Apparently someone had just died whereas before it was only petrification, which is great as a scare tactic but nowhere near as serious. It's possible that the real Heir freaked out and decided to stop on their own after reaching that point and realizing the seriousness of what they were doing."

"Petrifying people for months on end and scaring everyone half to death seems pretty serious to me," Ron muttered.

"But not as serious as killing people," Harry said. "Go on, Hermione."

"Another possibility is that they wanted to keep attacking people but they also didn't want to be caught so when Riddle identified Hagrid as the culprit, they realized he'd make the perfect scapegoat and so were sure that they'd remain safe. Additionally, you heard Dippet: the Governors were thinking of closing Hogwarts. Hogwarts is the only reputable magical school in the United Kingdom so unless they were a seventh year, they would have to make alternative schooling plans and if Hogwarts closed they wouldn't be able to use the Chamber anymore anyway."

"Alright," Harry nodded. "I can see where the real culprit might have taken advantage of Riddle's mistake and I can see how a mistake might have been made, what with Hagrid having a mysterious monster and a mysterious monster attacking students. He probably just assumed that the two instances were related and was never given any reason to think otherwise."

Hermione nodded in approval. "Occam's razor." Harry and Ron looked at her quizzically. "Never mind."

"What makes you think that Riddle would make Hagrid a scapegoat? He would have ruined Hagrid's life and not even ensured that the attacks would stop," Harry pointed out.

"Not everyone has the same high moral standards as you, Harry," Hermione told him gently. "Plus he was a bloody Slytherin!"

"I knew I'd heard the name T.M. Riddle before, I just couldn't remember where and it just came to me now," Ron announced. "You know that trophy I kept belching slugs on? It was his, for Special Services to the school or something. It said his name, year, and house on it. Slytherins don't have any problems blaming other people for things whenever it suits them. It's because they're pure evil."

"Don't be ridiculous; they are not!" Hermione snapped.

"Name one Slytherin that isn't," Ron challenged.

"Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini…" Hermione trailed off.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Oh, honestly! They're in our year! Do you actually know any Slytherins besides Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"We don't have to," Ron told her. "Because we know those four and those four are evil. Besides,
they're all prejudiced against Muggleborns and stuff."

"And you're 'all prejudiced and stuff' against Slytherins!" Hermione shot back.

Ron held up his hand. "Hermione, you're entitled to your own opinion, even though you're wrong, so let's just get back to why you think Riddle would feel the need to make Hagrid a scapegoat."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "There are plenty of reasons why Riddle might have done that, although none of them are very noble. First, there's the fact that he really, really seemed to hate that orphanage he lived at. If Hogwarts closed, chances are he wouldn't have the money to go anywhere else and so would be forced to try and exist in the Muggle or Magical world without a complete education and he could pretty much count on being stuck in some low-paying job. Also, he could know who the real Heir is but they might be a friend of his that he knows won't attack anyone else and he doesn't want to sell them out, so he'd rather blame Hagrid. Or else it's possible that he was the one behind all the attacks in the first place."

"Don't you think that you're basing your accusation on some pretty flimsy evidence?" Harry asked her. "It could be anyone."

"Harry, I hate to break it to you, but we based our last theory on the fact that Malfoy is the Slytherin we have the most contact with and doesn't really like us," Hermione pointed out. "And besides, I'm not accusing anyone, I'm merely pointing out that it is possible."

"It wasn't just that Malfoy didn't like us that was the problem," Ron cut in. "It was that he hates Muggleborns and was openly cheering when he saw Mrs. Norris. Not to mention that he said that he hopes the Heir kills you. He is clearly evil!"

"Yes, well, he obviously has some problems and quite possibly some sociopathic tendencies," Hermione admitted. "But on the other hand: he's twelve. Wouldn't it make more sense to look for a culprit among the upper years? Someone who might actually know enough magic to control whatever monster this is and keep him undetected? Someone like, say, the clearly fifth or sixth year Riddle?"

"I suppose I see your point," Harry nodded. "Besides, didn't that article Malfoy showed us say that his father was 41? According to Riddle the Chamber was opened fifty years ago and there really is no reason to lie about something like that, especially considering that we could just go check the trophy to see if the dates matched up."

"There's always Malfoy's grandfather," Ron said hopefully. "He'd be right around the same age. Besides, just because Malfoy denied he was the Heir to Crabbe and Goyle in a Common Room full of witnesses doesn't necessarily mean that he isn't. After all, would you trust Crabbe and Goyle with anything even remotely important?"

"Oh give it a rest, it's not him," Hermione snapped.

"I'm not sure I agree about the whole scapegoat thing, but I can buy the mistake theory," Harry said.

"Why don't you think he could be using Hagrid as a scapegoat?" Hermione frowned, trying to spot a flaw in her logic.

"Well, I don't think he'd risk it unless he was the Heir, but he said that he's a half-blood, like me. Why would a half-blood hate Muggleborns? Isn't that kind of a Pureblood thing?"
"Maybe he's a hypocrite," Hermione suggested. "I mean, God knows Hitler wasn't Aryan. Or maybe he didn't hate Muggleborns but just had some sociopathic tendencies and wanted to attack someone and the Chamber of Secrets legend provided him with a nice cover story that would keep suspicion off of him because he was a half-blood. Or maybe he did find the Chamber and the monster would only go after Muggleborns."

"You keep telling me all these reasons that Riddle could have been wrong or lying," Harry said slowly. "But you haven't given me one reason that it couldn't be Hagrid other than 'because he's our friend', which really isn't very persuasive."

Hermione shot him a Look. "You mean I really have to do that? It's not enough that he's our friend, has shown that he has absolutely no prejudice against Muggleborns, hates Slytherins with a passion—"

"Probably because Riddle framed him," Ron interjected. "And also because they're evil."

"Is almost obsessively loyal to Dumbledore, he was allowed to stay on at Hogwarts after being expelled when the monster was still there and Hagrid could have easily kept attacking people, and there is absolutely no reason why he would randomly wait fifty years before opening the Chamber again, not to mention why the same year that happened this mysterious enchanted diary shows up?"

"Well…when you put it that way…" Harry said sheepishly. "I guess Hagrid really didn't do it."

"Because Riddle did!" Ron proclaimed.

"We don't know that," Harry objected.

"No, but then again, you can't really expect three twelve-year-olds to get to the bottom of this. I move that we take this diary straight to Dumbledore before anything else happens. Even if Riddle was innocent, I still don't trust it."

"Hey!" Ron said brightly as they made their way out of the Common Room, past a very relieved and diary-less Ginny to the Headmaster's office. "I just realized: this means Harry was crazy after all."
"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" inquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

"Hmm…let's think," said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice. He almost continued with the always provocative 'Maybe Lord Voldemort', but quickly dismissed the idea. Even if he was right – which he was – Umbridge was being paid to not believe him and, in the grand scheme of things, convincing her didn't matter the slightest bit. Not as far as not wasting a year of Defense Against the Dark Arts went, at least. Already half of their teachers were duds and even if he was already seriously beginning to doubt this one's competency, he really didn't need her actively trying to be ineffectual.

So instead of continuing with the obvious and more interesting retort, Harry instead chose to play on her blatant prejudices with, "Maybe…a werewolf?"

Hermione, who had been mouthing 'sit down and shut up' over and over, stopped and cocked her head thoughtfully, trying to figure out what he was playing at. The rest of the class just stared blankly.

"A werewolf?" Umbridge repeated, looking dazed and a little disappointed. Clearly she had been looking forward to putting him in detention until the end of the term. Who knew, though, she might still get that chance by the end of the conversation.

"The two of us have a difference of opinion about whether or not there are dark wizards out to kill us all," Harry said diplomatically. "But I think we can all agree that werewolves are real, right?" He stared patiently at her.

"Right," Umbridge agreed reluctantly, unwilling to deny something so basic but displeased at being forced to agree with him.

"And werewolves can be anywhere or anybody. Why, as you just said yourself: two years ago we had a werewolf as a professor. If you can't be assured that you are in a werewolf-free environment within Hogwarts – widely regarded as the safest place in Britain – where can you be sure of it?" Harry asked rhetorically. And just as well, really, as Umbridge didn't appear to have an answer.

"Hey, Professor Lupin was the best we ever had-" Ron began angrily before Hermione kicked him. "Ow!"

"And that same year there were Dementors everywhere," Hermione added quickly, finally catching on. "And I know that we've been told that Dementors are completely loyal to the Ministry and whatnot but the first Quidditch game of the year was attacked by the guards and we didn't even have a Ministry employee on hand for them to respect."

"Not to mention that if I hadn't known how to make a corporeal Patronus, my cousin and I would be soulless right now," Harry concurred solemnly. "Although in his case, you might not notice
much of a difference."

"You were not attacked by Dementors over the summer, Potter, stop lying," Umbridge ordered shrilly, attempting to reassert her authority.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. "Because I seem to remember something about a trial in front of the full Wizengamot even though it was just for a school disciplinary matter. You ought to remember that, too, seeing as how you were there."

"Just because you had a trial does not mean that the attacks you fabricated really happened," Umbridge argued.

"Oh, I know," Harry nodded. "And passing right over just how completely ridiculous it was that I had a criminal trial for casting a Patronus in front of my already-aware-of-magic cousin, I was acquitted. That means that legally, I was attacked. Otherwise I would have at least gotten another warning or something."

Umbridge opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again. She couldn't very well dismiss the legality argument, Harry knew, seeing as how Voldemort was legally dead and she would very much like to keep it that way.

"And while we're on the theme of why we really, desperately need to be taught to defend ourselves because Hogwarts doesn't even begin to live up to its reputation as 'safest place in Britain' – quite the opposite, really – let's add Professor Lockhart to the list," Hermione continued, ears coloring a bit as she was reminded of how star-struck she had been back then.

"Professor…Lockhart?" Umbridge questioned. "That would be the teacher from three years ago who ended up in Janus Thickey Ward for long-term residents of St. Mungo's?"

"Yes," Hermione nodded. "He didn't really teach us anything or have us do anything besides reenact his books which wasted an entire year we could have spent doing something productive and that's bad enough. Worse, however, is his proficiency with memory charms. Here we had a man who had very little morals and who was willing to permanently damage students' minds to save his own skin wandering freely about the castle for an entire year. What's more, Dumbledore was gone for several weeks, so who even knows what he got up to? Frankly, I think I'm better off not knowing."

The room was silent for a moment as the implications of Hermione's statement sunk in and the class gave a collective shudder.

"First year we had a teacher who – for whatever reason – decided to steal the Philosopher's Stone which was hidden in the school at the time," Harry quickly changed the subject. "I really don't think Dumbledore thought that through all the way. I mean, if the Flamel's were willing to destroy it the minute someone came after it, which was why it was in Hogwarts in the first place, why bother endangering everyone? Why not just destroy it at the beginning of the year and be done with it? Or if they had kept it hidden for 600 years already, why did they suddenly need a new place to hide it? And don't even get me started on the wisdom of having a three-headed dog locked up around schoolchildren or of having the Stone guarded by such flimsy obstacles that three plucky first-years can get by-"

"Harry?" Hermione interrupted sweetly. When he looked over at her, she continued, "Point?"

"Oh, right," Harry said sheepishly. "Basically, Quirrell tried to kill me and if I hadn't been very, very, ridiculously-and-yet-somehow-typically-for-me lucky, I would be dead right now. And even last year, with the Tournament I was unexpectedly entered into. I had to go up against dragons,
merpeople, SEVENTH YEARS…if I only had theory on my side and went up against Viktor Krum, it goes without saying that the press wouldn't be trying to convince everyone I'm a lying schizophrenic, they would be too busy eulogizing me to death."

"If you're that concerned about your safety, you really shouldn't have entered the competition," Umbridge said stiffly.

Harry rolled his eyes and fought the urge to point out yet again that he hadn't entered. It wouldn't do any good; it would just get them on the subject of Voldemort again. "If you honestly believe that the security around and within the cup was so shoddy that a fourteen-year-old could hoodwink it and sneak in without anyone being any the wise until my name called out than you can rest assured that it was bound to happen to someone."

"And let's not forget the Forbidden Forest, which houses human-hating centaurs, acromantula, and thestrals, among other things. And we've been sent there for detention," Hermione sniffed. It was clear just what she thought about that bright idea. "Theory won't help you out much there. But even if you ignore the walking death-trap that is Hogwarts, there are always outside threats to consider. Vampires, for instance. I don't know very much about them, but I am naturally cautious around anyone who wants to suck my blood. Inferi are always creepy and can only be driven back by a powerful fire. Or how about giants? I know they mostly live up around Russia, but they do a lot of damage when they go on a rampage and it's been pretty quiet for a good fifteen years now."

"Or goblins," Dean piped up suddenly. "I mean, they rebel pretty much every time you turn around, make no secret of the fact that they hate wizards, and control the money supply. Am I the only one who sees a problem with this?"

"Yep," Ron said, a Pureblood to the last.

"I agree with Dean," Harry said, a little surprised that Dean had contributed. Then again, he really shouldn't have been seeing as how Dean was Muggleborn. Or close enough. "If they decide to rebel again, they can crash our economy. If that happens on Fudge's watch, there's no WAY he's getting reelected."

"And then there's just the everyday, ordinary Muggles. I mean, I know we have magic on our side, but if we can't use it then there's nothing stopping them from knifing us to death. And even WITH magic, I'm not sure I'd ever feel comfortable going up against a gun," Hermione confided.

"And Voldemort got his followers from somewhere, right? As did every other Dark Lord before him. Some wizards are just evil people out to hurt you," Harry announced.

"Some reporters, too," Hermione muttered. "And it's really better to be safe than dead, right?"

Umbridge looked torn between paranoid fear that Dumbledore was building an army and glee at the thought of spreading her xenophobic teachings. "What would you have me do?" she asked, finally.

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances.

"Teach us defensive magic," Hermione suggested. "We might not be attacked tomorrow or need to know anything that could destabilize the magical world, but there are a lot of dark creatures out there that refuse to recognize Ministry authority and, well, I'd feel better if the Ministry could prepare us to deal with things like this our entire life."

Umbridge was quiet for a long time. "I'll have to run it by Cornelius."
Harry grinned. "That's a yes," he whispered.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Hermione whispered back. "The last thing we need is for them to try and distract the public by going on a crusade against non-human magical creatures."

"There's nothing stopping them from doing that anyway," Harry pointed out. "Besides, Voldemort can't hide forever nor would he want to. Sooner or later the truth will come out and in the meantime if the Ministry isn't actively trying to sabotage us, things will go a lot smoother."

"What the hell was that about?" Ron asked them. "What's all this about being wary of dark creatures? Whatever happened to SPEW?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged another look.

"We'll tell you when you're older," they chorused.
Once Professor McGonagall was out of earshot, Harry turned to his friends. "It's tonight. Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note; I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turn up."

"Eh, not really," Ron corrected. "According to Dad the Ministry's hopelessly inefficient about these kinds of things. It'll probably take a good three hours just to confirm that no one needs him to be there."

Harry, as expected, looked even grimmer.

Hermione, meanwhile, had a look of intense concentration on her face. "But, Harry, about Dumbledore, don't you think-"

"Don't I think what?" Harry prompted as Hermione trailed off, looking nervously over Hermione's shoulder.

"Don't you think it's too nice of an afternoon for students to be indoors?" Snape's smooth voice cut in. "People might think you're…up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can they?"

"Actually, at this point I don't think it matters what we do as everyone gave up hope for us winning awhile ago," Harry answered truthfully.

Looking annoyed, Snape pressed forth valiantly, "Be that as it may, Potter, be assured that any more night-time wanderings will result in your immediate expulsion. I will personally make sure of it."

The minute Snape left, Ron quickly reassured Harry. "Don't worry, mate, Fred and George have gotten caught wandering around after curfew loads of times. Well, not so much recently, but definitely their first year. They got loads of owls and Mum was pissed."

"Right," Harry nodded distractedly, possible expulsion the furthest thing from his mind. "What were you saying about Dumbledore? Do you think there's any way we can reach him?"

"Let's not talk about this here in case someone else feels the need to come strolling by," Hermione suggested, dragging the boys along to an unused classroom. "Okay, now I don't really know how to reach Dumbledore-"

"Then we've got to protect the Stone ourselves," Harry said, pale but determined.

"Will you let me finish?" Hermione asked irritably.

"Sorry, please go on," Harry apologized.

"Right," Hermione nodded. "I'm not sure how to reach Dumbledore but…I know I've never actually spent any time with him one on one or even really seen him outside of meals or that one Quidditch match he went to, but he's supposed to be this really powerful wizard, right? The only one You-Know-Who ever feared, the head of all these different government systems, even the favored candidate for Minister of Magic. He defeated Grindelwald, worked on alchemy with Flamel, discovered the twelve uses of Dragon's blood…the list goes on and on."
"I get that Dumbledore's amazing, Hermione," Harry said, sounding slightly impatient. "But – aside from the fact that it would be really good if he were here right now, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well," Hermione elaborated patiently. "That means he can't very well be an absolute moron, right?"

"We can be fairly certain of that," Ron agreed cautiously. "But, to reiterate Harry's earlier point: what does that have to do with anything?"

"If something bad happened here at Hogwarts, who would be the first person you'd think to blame?" Hermione inquired.

"Malfoy," Harry replied immediately.

"Snape," Ron said at the same time.

They exchanged a look.

"Either or, really," Ron decided, shrugging. "Maybe Malfoy for the littler things and Snape for the big ones."

"Right," Hermione gave them a strange look. Unpleasant and devious though he may be, Malfoy was kind of eleven and should hardly be anyone's first choice of suspects. "Well, if we, three first years, have figured out that Snape is clearly bad news and not to be trusted, don't you think that Dumbledore, one of the most brilliant wizards alive, should be able to also work this out? Especially with people questioning him on it so frequently that he's apparently adopted an 'I trust Snape, stop asking me about it' policy?"

"What are you saying, Hermione?" Harry asked slowly.

Hermione sighed, feeling very tired suddenly. "I'm saying that if Dumbledore's an idiot, we're dead anyway."

"No one would call Dumbledore stupid," Harry admitted. "But just the same…I don't quite think he has grasp on, shall we say, common sense as you or I do."

"I know, I know, a lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, but even so-" Hermione began.

"What are you guys talking about?" Ron interrupted.

"Well…" Harry hesitated. "Think of it this way. Gringott's is supposed to be the safest place in Britain, right?"

"Except maybe Hogwarts, right," Ron agreed.

"Hagrid took the Philosopher's Stone from Gringott's because Dumbledore knew that someone was going to be after it. Sure enough, that very day someone tried to take it. Now, knowing that a powerful dark wizard who could manage to break into the nigh-impeneatable Gringott's is after a magical artifact capable of giving the user unlimited wealth and immortality, what does Dumbledore decide to do? Put it in a castle full of schoolchildren."

"Well, yeah, but it'll be safe here," Ron argued.

"Not if someone's trying to steal it tonight," Hermione pointed out. "And even overlooking that…"
what kind of Headmaster tells their students that an area of the castle is off-limits or else they are going to die? I mean, Hogwarts is a dangerous place and accidents do happen but...there is a three-headed-dog in our school and that is probably the least imposing of the traps guarding that thing and that is only separated from us by a locked door. At the very least, you'd think they would have warded off the area or something..."

"Not to mention basically announcing to everyone where they could find danger and knowing that we're mostly rebellious teenagers we'd probably end up seeking it out anyway," Harry added.

"So...you're saying that by hiding the Philosopher's Stone here, Dumbledore made all of us targets for You-Know-Who?" Ron worked out slowly.

Hermione closed her eyes and counted to ten in her head. "Very good, Ron." Of course, we JUST said that, but...

"Considering that You-Know-Who is the one who's after the Stone and given how very dangerous and powerful it is, if it's not going to be destroyed and Gringott's apparently isn't safe enough, Dumbledore probably felt he had no other choice than to keep it with him," Hermione defended. "I'm not sure why he couldn't just keep it on him, or in his office, or destroy it, but that's neither here nor there. It may well not have occurred to him. What we know he's heard before are accusations against Snape, if the strength of Dumbledore's defense against him is any indication. According to Hagrid, he has complete faith in Snape and that means he's considered the matter and decided whatever reason Snape has for being on his side is compelling enough to put him above suspicion."

"I know what I saw," Harry insisted stubbornly. "Snape was threatening Quirrell. Twice! And afterwards Quirrell looked like a wreck."

"What EXACTLY did you hear?" Hermione asked.

"I don't remember the first, it was months ago," Harry said dismissively. "Something about how Quirrell didn't want to cross him and wanted to know whether or not Quirrell had worked out how to get past Fluffy."

"What's with Snape's Quirrell obsession, anyway?" Ron asked. "I mean, every time you turn around Snape's threatening him."

"Who knows?" Harry shrugged impatiently.

"Ron..." Hermione trailed off, looked faintly shocked. "I can't believe I'm about to say this but...you have a point."

"I do?" Ron looked thrilled. Confused, but thrilled.

"You do," Hermione nodded. "Think how hard it was for us to get the information about how to get past Fluffy. Or about the Philosopher's Stone. Or about what else was guarding it. Or about Norbert. Or...about anything, really. Hagrid is a really guy, but he can't seem to keep a secret to save his life. Why in the world would Snape waste all this time and effort bullying the answer out of Quirrell, who probably only knew because Hagrid can't keep a secret, and not somehow get it out of Hagrid? It just seems more efficient."

"Point," Harry admitted. "But what else are we supposed to make of the Snape-Quirrell threats?"

Hermione hesitated. "You're going to think I'm crazy."

"Too late," Ron muttered.
"It's not too late for me to take back your point," Hermione threatened.

Ron gulped. "I'll be good."

Looking satisfied, Hermione turned back to Harry. "What if we've got it all backwards?"

"Backwards?" Harry repeated.

"Backwards," Hermione confirmed. "We know that Snape was threatening Quirrell about the Stone. That could mean either one of two things. Either Snape wants the Stone or he thinks Quirrell does."

Ron immediately burst out laughing. "Quirrell? That guy looks faint if you even mention any dangerous creatures. Snape's much more likely."

"That's kind of the point, isn't it?" Hermione pointed out.

"I don't quite follow," Harry admitted.

"What kind of evil villain whose success depends on going undetected would go around acting like such a…such a bloody git?" Hermione posed reasonably.

"A stupid one?" Ron suggested.

"A stupid one who Dumbledore would immediately be onto and not actively defend," Hermione concluded.

"If you think Quirrell's out to get the Stone and Snape knows and Snape is on Dumbledore's side, he must have told him. Why is Quirrell still here then?" It was Harry's turn to be sensible.

"Other than the fact that it's better to have someone working for You-Know-Who here where Dumbledore can keep an eye on him – although probably not good for we students – than wherever doing whatever nefarious deeds he feels like and able to attack at any random time?" Hermione asked. She sighed. "The Defense Against the Dark Arts position has been notoriously difficult to fill for the last forty years."

"That's…awful," Harry finally said.

"Think of it, Harry. Forty years. A new teacher every year. People start thinking the position is cursed after awhile and you have to take anyone that applies. I'm really not looking forward to seeing who our other six teachers will be…" Hermione shuddered at the thought.

"But he just…I can't see it," Harry admitted.

"Because he's good at drawing attention away from himself by acting pathetic," Hermione agreed. "But I refuse to believe he's quite that pathetic. And if he were, it wouldn't have taken Snape months to get the information about Fluffy out of him."

"Fine," Harry bit out. "It could be Snape OR Quirrell. But one of them is working for Voldemort and intend to go after the Stone tonight. I have to go get it first!"

Ron coughed. "Don't you mean 'we'?"

Harry looked confused. "No, I'm pretty sure I mean 'I'."

"Disregarding the fact that there's no way in hell we'd let you potentially face off against a minion"
of You-Know-Who by yourself," Hermione began.

"Wait, why are we disregarding that?" Harry demanded.

"Because you're outvoted," Ron said bluntly.

"What he said," Hermione nodded. "Now, disregarding that, I think that we can be reasonably sure that the Stone is probably safer among whatever traps Dumbledore set than with a bunch of first years."

"But he knows how to get past all of them!" Harry protested.

"I'm sure Dumbledore set a final trap that he didn't tell anyone about so as to make it harder for someone to get the information," Hermione pointed out. "Besides, wouldn't it be better to just take your Invisibility Cloak and wait OUTSIDE the room Fluffy's in? If we see anyone coming, we can stun them. If we see anyone leaving, we stun them too. Taken by surprise, it should work."

"But if they're leaving and they have the Philosopher's Stone then we won't be able to do anything against them," Harry countered.

"The elixir of life is only temporary. You have to keep drinking it and it will not mean that you can throw off spells, just that you're not going to die," Hermione paused. "Come to think of it, I'm not even sure it means that. If you cut someone's head off and they're under the effects of the elixir, would they die or would they just survive decapitated? That's actually an interesting thought..."

"Focus," Ron snapped.

Hermione jumped. "Right. Even if whoever does have the Philosopher's Stone, there would only be one way in or out, otherwise all the traps could be easily avoided. All we have to do is wait, hope the traps work, and if they don't ambush them."

"I agree with the 'let's not get ourselves killed' plan," Ron spoke up.

"Fine," Harry agreed, looking rather put-out that he wasn't about to get to rush headlong into certain death.

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Several hours later, Dumbledore found them on his way to check on the Stone. He went down to find Quirrell muttering to himself in front of the mirror and stunned him, thereby trapping Voldemort. Now, to figure out how to destroy him...
"Look…what did happen that night when…you know, when…with Cedric Diggory and all?" Seamus asked, sounding hesitant.

"Why are you asking me for?" Harry snapped. "Just read the Daily Prophet like your mother, why don't you? That'll tell you all you need to know."

"Don't you have a go at my mother," Seamus warned.

Harry was about to snap back that he would have a go at anyone who called him a liar when he realized that he would have to sleep in the same room as Seamus for the next nine months and – if worse came to worse – two years after that. Besides, since Seamus was…technically his friend, it would probably be worse from relative strangers.

"I'm not having a go at your mother," Harry said instead, forcing himself to sound calm.

"Sure sounded like it," Seamus said defensively.

"I-" Harry paused. "You know what, I don't want to have to go into this with every single person in Gryffindor, so I'm getting it out of the way now. Come down to the Common Room, I'm calling a House Meeting."

"Can you do that?" Neville asked dubiously.

Harry shrugged. "If everyone's so eager to hear…well, anything from me on the subject, they'll be there. Besides, since Percy graduated two years ago, none of the other Prefects are uptight enough to really care."

Harry went down to the Common Room and, ten minutes later, the rest of the House was assembled.

"Now, I've heard that some of you think that I'm insane. Please raise your hand if that is the case," Harry began. Three-quarters of the hands went up. "I see. That's a bit more than I thought but… I've also heard that some of you think that I'm lying about Voldemort." Harry paused here as the gasps that filled the room were quite loud "-coming back. Please raise your hand if that is the case." The same three-fourths raised their hands. "Hm. In that case, Hermione, will you come up here, please?"

The girl in question looked surprised but did as she was told. "Me? But I don't know anything about-"

"You don't need to," Harry cut her off. "Just help me fend off such blatant stupidity as people thinking I'm lying AND crazy."
"You are, though. I read it in the Daily Prophet," a little first-year girl spoke up.

"Excuse me, do I know you?" Harry asked. "No? We've never met before until right now? Excuse me if I don't actually care what you think then. New rule: the only people who are allowed to question me are the people I'm on a first-name basis with. If you don't like that, you can just leave now and not get to hear anything."

There were a few grumbles at that but everyone remained in their seats.

"Since Harry specifically called me up here to deal with the 'both insane and lying' opinion, I'll start by addressing that," Hermione announced. "I, personally, believe that Harry is – for the most part – sane and honest."

"For the most part?" Harry repeated, wounded.

"Harry, think about some of the messes you've gotten involved in over the years and then ask me that again," Hermione told him bluntly. "That said, if You-Know-Who is not back then Harry either being crazy or lying are the only two options. He CANNOT be both, however. If Harry is crazy then he hallucinated seeing You-Know-Who's return – possibly because of stress and trauma brought on by witnessing Cedric's sudden and mysterious death – but even though that wouldn't really be the case, Harry honestly believed it to be so, thus he would be telling the truth. Wrong, but honest. The other possibility is that Harry is just lying. He knows You-Know-Who isn't back but is saying it anyway. There are only three possibilities: either Harry's right, he's crazy but he believes himself to be telling the truth, or he's sane but lying."

Dennis Creevey hesitantly raised his hand, unsure whether or not his brother's hero had any idea who he was and thus whether he was allowed to voice his question. "Wouldn't claiming that a psychopathic mass-murderer who terrorized magical Britain for years is back when you know he's not be a sign of insanity?"

Harry looked slightly put-out and glared at the younger Creevey. "Point. But why in the world would I lie about something like that? And if anybody says 'because you're crazy' I'm going to kick them out of this meeting."

"Fame?" Seamus suggested. "You did want to be in the Triwizard Tournament last year and you kept getting into mishaps every year before then. Maybe you're addicted to fame and need to keep finding bigger and more exciting things to do or claim you did so you could maintain your fame."

"You did NOT just compare me to Lockhart," Harry said incredulously.

Ron winced. "Low blow, man, low blow."

Seamus had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry. My point still stands, though."

"Okay, first of all, I admit to wanting to be in the Tournament," Harry conceded. "Then again, so did most of the people in this room. If I had known there would be dragons, however, you can be assured I would have stood guard outside the Goblet of Fire to make sure no one snuck my name in there."

"Are you sure you didn't enter yourself?" a sixth-year Harry vaguely recognized as Cormac McLaggen asked suspiciously.

"Of course I'm sure," Harry replied. "How is this even still an issue? Didn't everyone decide I didn't do it after the First Task? Or after the insane Death Eater admitted to entering my name? God, even Fudge admitted to that much, even if he did think that Crouch Jr.'s plot to revive Voldemort-" another pause for gasps "-was a load of bullocks."
"What about the other attention-seeking you've done over the years?" Parvati asked, still a little miffed that Harry ruined the Yule Ball for her.

"Hm...let's see...first year I had to protect the Philosopher's Stone." Harry began.

"I thought it was called the Sorcerer's Stone," a second year boy piped up.

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Then you're an idiot. Now, first year I had to protect the Philosopher's Stone from Quirrell, who was trying to steal it at the time at the behest of someone you may or may not believe was Voldemort."

Dean blinked. "Really? I thought Ron said that the Stone was actually safer in the Mirror than it was after you showed up and that if it wasn't for the out-of-nowhere love protection you had that rendered Quirrell unable to even touch you, he would have made off with the Stone with no problem."

Harry glared at Ron a very clear 'Traitor!' and the red-headed boy shrugged helplessly.

Harry coughed awkwardly. "Yes, well, we didn't know that at the time and Dumbledore had been lured away from the castle, McGonagall had apparently caught a case of stupid and wouldn't hear us out about our concerns someone was going after the Stone, and we were eleven. What were we supposed to do? Anyway, Second Year I had to face down a Basilisk to save Ginny and if anybody dares to doubt me on that, ask one of the teacher's. Dumbledore sold the Basilisk in order to increase the budget for the foreseeable future. Third Year...well, that was interesting. A complete and total accident that it happened but we ran into Sirius Black and a bunch of Dementors and lived to tell the tale."

"What about that one time when you lost us 150 points in one night?" Angelina asked. "That doesn't seem like it was in the pursuit of a noble cause."

Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchanged an exasperated look. As a matter of fact, getting rid of Norbert WAS a noble cause but they couldn't very well bring it up incase Hagrid might get in trouble. Besides, you'd think four years was enough to get over something like that, especially considering they won the House Cup anyway.

"That was four years ago," Hermione pointed out. "Besides, all we did was break curfew." It was a measure of how far she'd come over the last few years that she could say that was 'all' they did when back then she'd rather have died than been expelled. "The reason we lost 150 points was because Harry was shocked that breaking curfew warranted a deduction of 50 points and automatically protested that she couldn't do that."

"Breaking curfew usually doesn't result in the loss of fifty points," Fred insisted.

"Trust us; we'd know," George agreed knowingly.

"The reason she was so upset as to do that in the first place and to mistake Harry's shock as doubting her authority or something to that effect was because Malfoy got it into his head we were going to be dragon smuggling and Neville overheard him so the pair of them were out of bed that night as well. Professor McGonagall seemed to think Harry and I were trying to get Malfoy in trouble and found it funny that Neville was tricked to. I'm not sure why she thought we were going around bullying people or why we were out of bed ourselves in that case, but..." Hermione trailed off. "Professor McGonagall really wasn't very sensible first year, was she? Thankfully she's gotten a lot better."

"And we suffered through weeks on almost ridiculous scorn from everyone who wasn't a
Slytherin and despite that, we still won the House Cup," Harry added. "So just let it go already."

"So…what did happen with Sirius Black and those Dementors?" Katie Bell asked.

"I don't think I'm legally allowed to talk about it as it would make the Minister sound incompetent," Harry replied flippantly.

"I get the lying thing, I guess…" Seamus admitted reluctantly. "But what about the crazy thing? The Daily Prophet's been saying for months now that you were losing it and then last May…you lost it. It seems pretty reasonable."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Rita Skeeter is a sensationalist journalist. She writes scandalous stories just for the reaction she gets, she found my nightmares and headaches to be enough evidence I was crazy, and she only ever interviewed Slytherin students that hate me. That's not exactly a reliable source…"

"Besides, I think the fact that she's yet to contribute anything to the current media attack on Harry to be a tacit admission of error," Hermione said innocently, ignoring the fact that Rita was only silent because Hermione was forcing her hand.

"I KNOW I'm not lying and I'm firmly convinced of my sanity." Harry said firmly. "I will not, at this point, talk about what happened that night because if nothing else I saw Cedric die and that's not the sort of thing you can just talk about whenever anyone gets curious. Still, if I were lying or crazy, I'm obviously not the violent crazy – unless anyone accuses me of having a hand in Cedric's death in which case, make no mistake, I will send you to the Hospital Wing – so I'm honestly at a loss as to everyone's reactions towards me."

"No one wants to believe You-Know-Who's back. I know I don't but I believe in Harry. Still, I can understand everyone's instinctive need to label him a liar or insane but Harry's right. Sooner or later You-Know-Who will have to show himself or people will start going missing again and everyone will know the truth. Until then, people will continue to think that Harry's wrong and Professor Dumbledore is an old fool for believing him. Still, I've seen people shy away from Harry and talk about how their parents didn't want them to come back. The question is: Why?" Hermione asked rhetorically.

"Because Harry is a lying schizophrenic," Cormac replied. "Duh."

"You've lost your talking privileges," Ginny informed him, sending a silencing spell his way. "They JUST went over that."

"Thank you, Ginny," Hermione smiled at the younger girl. "Now, if Harry's lying then why in the world are you and your parents so scared of him? It might be incredibly bad taste to lie about something like that, but it's not actually dangerous. Unless there was a copycat going around, but surely that wouldn't require Harry to think the idea up and most people are too scared to do so. If Harry were crazy, I can see why there would be more cause for concern but no one actually thinks Harry is particularly violent – except maybe with Malfoy – so that's not really an issue either. After all, everyone thinks Luna Lovegood is insane, yet no one's scared of her, so why should Harry be any different? And even if Dumbledore is wrong to blindly support Harry, does that really mean he can't run a school? Naivety and Headmaster-ing aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, after all."

"You know, that's actually a good point," Seamus conceded. "My Mum did just say 'stay away from that Potter boy, he's a filthy liar' and unless she thinks I'll start being a compulsive liar too, there really isn't any reason to, especially since I already believe him to be a liar so I'll be on my guard."
"So…even though I won't talk about what happened so there isn't actually anyone we've managed to persuade that I'm right, is everyone at least no longer afraid of me and/or convinced they should transfer schools because of the honesty of one student?" Harry asked.

There were several murmurs of agreement. Then…

"I'll always believe in you, Harry!" Colin called out.

Harry sighed. "Of COURSE you will…"
A Death Eater Did it!

"How did he die?" whispered Tonks. "How did it happen?"

Just like when he was informing Hagrid of Dumbledore's recent demise earlier, Harry was uncertain of what exactly to say. He knew what happened of course, or thought he did, but something was off and he couldn't for the life of him work out what it was. No, he'd speak with Hermione privately before making that little tidbit public knowledge.

"I was there, I saw it," Harry said in a low, hollow voice. "Dumbledore and I had gone out earlier on a...reconnaissance mission, I suppose you could say, and arrived back at the Astronomy Tower because that's where the Mark was...Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak - and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him. More Death Eaters arrived and then they killed him. The Avada Kedavra."

"Who?" Lupin demanded, sounding positively feral. "Who killed him?"

Harry hesitated. "I don't -"

"You don't know?" Lupin pressed. "You were there; you must have seen it! Do you not know the name, can you give a description? Anything?"

"I saw," Harry said slowly. "But...I don't want to give them the glory of being the one to finally kill Dumbledore. They want the credit, they're not going to get it from me." It was, Harry supposed, even true. After all, if Snape had managed to pull the wool over Dumbledore's eyes all these years, the last thing any of them needed was to get their faith-by-proxy in the Potions Master shoved in their face and have to face the countless 'if only's' that he was already going through, and he was just a student! He had no idea how those adults who had more experience and had known more of the Snape's story would feel, if they knew.

"I don't quite think you understand," Lupin said, sounding frustrated. "They KILLED Dumbledore. We can't let that go unpunished."

"It's a Death Eater; they've committed plenty of other atrocities and will commit many more. We're going after them anyway and I stand by my refusal to say who did the deed," Harry said stubbornly, making a mental note not to meet anyone who might possibly know Legilimency's eyes until either interest died down or he learned Occlumency, whichever came first.

The next few minutes were spent filling Harry in on the battle and Harry explaining how the Death Eaters had come to enter Hogwarts in the first place.

"Severus has left with Draco Malfoy, then?" McGonagall asked eventually.

Harry looked down. "Yes," he said shortly. "There was really no way he could not have done that, though. Either he's on their side and is finally showing his true colors or he's still playing the part of a spy and couldn't risk his cover being blown."

"I see," McGonagall looked troubled. "I suppose that, for the time being, we'll have to put our trust in him. Dumbledore did, after all, and he's done nothing to break that trust."

"Indeed," Harry said, his voice a little higher than usual. That could be dangerous and he might have to correct them on that depending on how his talk with Hermione went. Surely Snape wouldn't risk making contact within the next 24-hours, right? Especially since he didn't know
about Harry's prevarication.

"Is there something you're not saying, Harry?" Lupin asked.

"No..." Harry lied. "It's just...I learned something about Snape earlier this evening. Dumbledore said he deeply regretted the death of my parents. There is nothing on this Earth that will convince me that he really spent all that much time mourning my father, so unless Dumbledore went senile at some point and we all missed it, there's got to be something more there. Snape never missed a chance to say something cutting about my dad, but for the life of me I cannot remember his saying anything about my mother. Professor Slughorn said they were his two top potions students so they probably spent some time together. Were they on good terms or...?"

"Actually," Lupin said, sounding vaguely wistful the way he always did when thinking back to 'the good old days,' "they were great friends. Maybe even best friends. That's part of why James hated him so much, Harry, he was absolutely convinced that Severus was in love with her. Of course, they had a falling out after that incident you saw in Severus' Pensieve regarding the OWL's..."

Harry's eyes widened. This had not been what he was expecting at all. "I see..." he said softly, his mind working furiously. "Hermione, I need to talk to you. Alone."

Hermione looked up at him, pale-faced and trembling. "Now?" she asked incredulously. "Can't this wait-?"

"No," Harry said firmly. "It can't. It's important."

"Is this about the you-know-what?" Ron asked, also rising. "Because if it is, I'm coming with you."

"No," Harry shook his head. "It's not about that. I just need Hermione, though. Too many people would just confuse things and none of us are thinking clearly right now. Just the same, it's something that has to be settled, and fast."

Looking curious, Hermione followed him out of the Hospital Wing and straight to the entrance of Dumbledore's office. After Harry had given the password and the two stone gargoyles sprang aside to allow them entrance, Hermione spoke softly, "Dumbledore's office? Is this really the best place to be after...after..." her voice broke.

"Probably not," Harry admitted. "But it's the only place I know of where I can find a Pensieve. Besides, like you said, no one will really want to be here so soon after...you know."

"What do you need a Pensieve for?" Hermione asked.

"I need your opinion on what happened tonight," Harry responded.

"My opinion on what happened?" Hermione repeated, confused. "Well, it's awful, of course, but I don't see why you'd need to meet here to know that."

Harry raised his wand to his temple and extracted his memory the night's events, of the Tower, the Cave, hell, even the conversation with Trelawney and Dumbledore's final defense of Snape in good measure. Then he gestured towards the Pensieve and Hermione, looking incredibly reluctant, submerged herself in the night's events.

"Oh my God..." Hermione gasped when she was through. "Snape...how could he? We trusted him! I trusted him!"
"I don't know," Harry confessed, removing the memory from the Pensieve and placing it safely back in his head. "Don't make eye contact with anyone who might try and find out what happened from you," he advised.

"You have to tell someone! They still think we can trust Snape," Hermione sounded on the verge of hysteria.

"Hermione," Harry said sharply. "Focus. I might, but I just don't understand what happened."

Hermione closed her eyes and took several deep, calming breaths. "What's not to understand?" she asked, sounding marginally calmer. "Snape betrayed us."

"It was mostly Dumbledore's last words that threw me. Do you remember what they were?" Harry prompted.

"Yes, they were 'Please. Severus, please,'" Hermione recited, sounding a little sick. "And then… he just killed him."

"What in the world was he talking about? Was he pleading for his life? The man who told me not to feel bad for the Flamels because death 'was but the next great adventure' and who kept mocking Voldemort's fear of death…it just doesn't sound like him," Harry explained, hoping she'd catch on to his train of thought soon. "Not to mention that not ten minutes before he died, he bade me go fetch Snape, presumably to heal him. I know he killed him instead, but regardless of what side Snape is really on, Dumbledore BELIEVED he was on his side, so even if he were the type to beg, why would he feel the need?"

"It doesn't have to have been a plea for his life," Hermione slowly pointed out. "It could just have easily been 'please save me', although you're right, he thought Snape was on his side so he probably wouldn't bother with that. 'Please don't do anything stupid by attacking four-on-one' if he thought it was to be a futile effort and he didn't want Snape and Malfoy to die as well."

"What about 'please, kill me'?" Harry asked softly.

"What?" Hermione eyes widened. "Why would he-?"

"I'm not sure what that potion did to him, Hermione," Harry told her. "It was some pretty nasty stuff, though, and hand-chosen by Voldemort himself to guard a piece of his soul. Fenrir Greyback was there and he was talking about some pretty horrible things. 'Avada Kedavra' is probably a much quicker, easier death than anything they had in mind. Or what if, God forbid, they had managed to take him to Voldemort? How do you think he would have fared, drained and unarmed, against someone like him?"

"I agree that he probably would have died anyway," Hermione conceded unhappily. "But how does that point to Snape being innocent?"

Harry laughed harshly. "Oh, I'm not saying he is. He did kill Dumbledore, after all, regardless of his reason and I'm adding that to my ever-growing list of reasons I hate him."

"Then why bother trying to puzzle out his motives?" Hermione questioned. "Dumbledore and Voldemort haven't been able to tell conclusively since we were infants. What makes you think you'll be able to work it out here?"

"I don't," Harry replied. "I just want to see if it's possible for there to be some ambiguity or if it's really as clear-cut as I had first thought. Besides, I've thought about it and the end result is the same: while we may need to warn the others that Snape is not to be trusted, I do not want people to know he killed Dumbledore."
"Why not?" Hermione didn't understand. "He ought to be punished for-"

"He's in hiding now," Harry explained. "Not to mention that with Dumbledore gone, the Death Eaters will probably make their move soon and so it's not like we'll be able to really try him for the foreseeable future and after what happened with Sirius, I can't stand back and watch someone thrown into Azkaban without a trial. Besides, if he's on Voldemort's side then I don't want him to have the honor of killing the only one Voldemort considered a threat and if he was on Dumbledore's…well, I don't want him to be vilified for the ultimate act of loyalty, either."

"I suppose if Voldemort knows that Snape did the deed then his loyalty would be beyond question," Hermione mused. "I just…there was so much hatred on his face…"

"Would you be happy to find yourself in a situation where you had to kill Dumbledore?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Or, of course, he could really hate Dumbledore."

"I've just thought of something," Hermione remembered. "Remember after Ron got poisoned? Hagrid was talking about how he'd overheard an argument between Snape and Dumbledore. Snape said that maybe Dumbledore took too much for granted and Snape didn't want to do 'it' anymore. Do you think they were talking about this? I mean, the possibility must have come up at some point, regardless of what side Snape is actually on."

"You're right," Harry realized. "And regardless of loyalty, expressing some hesitation would probably be a good idea to keep Dumbledore thinking he was on his side."

"So we're basically back to where we started," Hermione noted. "Like so many before us, we have no idea where Snape's loyalty lies."

"I couldn't believe it earlier when I confronted Dumbledore about Snape 'accidentally' signing my parents' death warrants because he hated my dad and I honestly thought Dumbledore had lost it. Now, though, if he were friends with my mother I could understand why he might be uneasy about going after her, especially if my dad was right when he thought Snape loved her. Of course, one generally does not go around calling their friends or the people that they love 'mudbloods' but then it did end their friendship so I suppose he had time to miss her," Harry mused.

"So what do we do?" Hermione asked. "If you're adamant about not telling anyone who really killed Dumbledore than I can't very well tell people because I wasn't here and only have your word for it. Besides, you're my best friend and I'll stick by you. The Order can't really blindly trust him, though, because we have no idea whatsoever if he'll betray us or if he already has."

"I think we can just say that since we don't know why Dumbledore trusted Snape – which we don't, though we may suspect – and Dumbledore's gone while Snape is spending all his time playing the role of Death Eater, we need to proceed with caution and given the amount of time he spends with Voldemort the obsessive Legilimencer, they shouldn't tell him anything more than necessary. Besides, he has no reason to believe that I wouldn't have gone screaming to anyone that would listen what he did."

"So that's it then, we're left with nothing more than we started with: a mystery," Hermione concluded.

"You know what? I bet he's not even grateful..." Harry grumbled.
Blearily, Hermione opened her eyes.

"Hermione!" Harry said, sounding rather strained. "You're awake!"

"You sound disappointed," Hermione pointed out.

"Well, yeah, I kind of am…" Harry admitted. "But not because of you, I swear!" he quickly assured her.

"Then what's wrong? I mean, all the petrifaction victims are alright now, right? It's been a few months so you've probably caught whoever's responsible, right?" Hermione asked, sounding a bit uncertain. After all, it had been MONTHS if the Mandrakes were ready to revive them and surely the school would be closed by now if the attacks hadn't stopped? Although Harry just looked so crestfallen that something had to be wrong.

"Oh, yeah. Voldemort had an evil diary that was possessing Ginny, but I destroyed it yesterday, so it's all good," Harry said dismissively.

"Possessing Ginny?" Hermione sounded concerned. "As in, Ron's sister?" At Harry's nod, she pressed, "She's okay, right?"

"Yeah…" For some reason that just made Harry look even more depressed, which confused Hermione. That was a good thing, wasn't it?

The little redheaded girl in question chose that moment to walk into the Hospital Wing. She headed towards Colin, but stopped short at the sight of Harry. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, the Weasley girl all but fled the room.

"Okay, what was that all about?" Hermione demanded as Harry didn't seem too surprised.

"Ginny won't talk to me," Harry mumbled miserably.

"I can see that," Hermione said dryly. "She could never talk to you, though. When you took it upon yourself to befriend her, she almost passed out every time you tried to get more than two words at a time out of her."

"No, I mean she really won't talk to me," Harry explained. "She's freaked out, I should have expected that. I've just got to give her some time. She'll come around."

"Some time for what?" Hermione was confused. "I'm guessing the fact that Voldemort was involved and you seem to know the details means that you were involved in Ginny's rescue, right? Why would that make her avoid you? Is her crush just making it impossible for her to stay in the same room with you without passing out or something?"

"Not exactly…" Harry said quietly.

"You're not telling me something, Harry. What happened?" Hermione demanded.

"Alright, I'll tell you," Harry relented. His eyes turned steely. "I want an Unbreakable Vow, first."

"An Unbreakable-? Are you crazy?" Hermione sputtered. "No, I am not swearing an Unbreakable Vow. You'll either have to trust me without one or keep it to yourself."
Harry seriously considered that for a moment, then shook his head wearily. "Fine, I'll tell you. But this has to stay between us. Not even Professor Dumbledore knows about this."

"Does anybody?" Hermione asked.

"Ginny does, and that's why she's so freaked out," Harry explained solemnly. "I'm not actually twelve. I'm a thirty-year-old survivor of the Great Voldemort War. I finally manage to defeat Voldemort seventeen years from now. He comes back in two years and the war really starts in three. I won…but there were casualties. Heavy casualties. By the end, I was the only wizard left in Britain. Magical Europe was devastated as well. If it hadn't been for the Americans finally taking notice of our plight after Voldemort set up a trade embargo to try and keep them out of the war, things would have been over years ago. I was…depressed. Suicidal, really. Everyone I had ever known and loved was gone and I had to watch most of them die. It was…very violent. And if that weren't bad enough, if we didn't destroy the bodies fast enough, they joined Voldemort's ever-growing army of Inferi. Eventually, Dumbledore's portrait helped me work out a spell that could theoretically send my soul back in time. The catch was, I had to kill myself first. Avada Kedavra."

Hermione looked horrified. "I…I honestly don't know what to say. I know you wouldn't joke about something like that but I'm not sure if that's what really happened or if you're just…delusional," she said, unable to think of an appropriate euphemism.

Harry smiled sadly. "And so the rumors of insanity begin. Two years earlier than I expected, but…I was hoping to make changes, after all. Befriending Ginny was supposed to be one of them, but that's a no go. She was just too damn shy before and now she won't even talk to me."

"She's freaked out because you're from the future? Or does she think you're crazy?" Hermione asked, trying to be sympathetic.

"Neither, actually," Harry said wryly. "THAT she was okay with. She asked me why she kept dreaming about my life and I suppose she's been hearing a stray thought from me here and there throughout the year."

"What-?" Hermione breathed.

"I told her she was my wife," Harry said frankly. "We have a Soul Bond."

Hermione immediately started choking.

"Ah, man, what's wrong?" Harry asked, concerned. "Don't tell me you like me! I mean, I love you and all, but you're like my sister! Besides, if I even thought about it, Ron would castrate me with a toothpick…" Harry shuddered.

"L-like you? Ron?" Hermione shrieked when she could speak again. "You two are my best friends! I'm twelve, I don't actually really have hormones yet!" She paused. "And for that matter, neither does Ginny. That's probably why she freaked out."

"But Ginny loves me," Harry protested. "She's always loved me."

"She loves her celebrity crush who she's heard bedtime stories about," Hermione corrected. "I do wonder what exactly those tales consist of since from what I can tell you were a normal baby until the night your parents died and they you disappeared. It's a good mystery, but doesn't make for a very gripping narrative."

Harry grimaced. "It's best you don't ask. Near the end, I was still fielding questions about whether
or not I was really Merlin's apprentice or if my real father was Snape. Or Dumbledore. Or – God forbid – VOLDEMORT."

"Wow. Just…you're right, I'm not going to ask," Hermione decided. "I am going to say that Ginny's only actually known you for about a year and you've yet to have a conversation that lasted for longer than five minutes when I was petrified. Aside from when you were saving her, did that change at all in the last few months?"

"Well, no…" Harry admitted. "But not from lack of trying!"

"Face it, Harry. Ginny seems like a very nice girl and I'm sure she'll grow up to be a wonderful person, but right now as far as you're concerned, she's just your typical fangirl who happens to be the sister of your best friend," Hermione said flatly.

Harry's eyes flashed angrily. "Ginny is not a fangirl! How dare you even say that?!?!"

"Because she is?" Hermione asked dryly. "Or haven't you seen her Harry Potter scrapbook, Harry Potter T-Shirt, membership of the Harry Potter fan club-"

"That exists?" Harry looked horrified. "I thought that was just a myth…"

"Harry Potter plushie, Harry Potter blanket, Harry Potter button, Harry Potter-"

"Alright, already, I get the picture," Harry grumbled. "So maybe she's a bit immature right now. But she's still my wife and I love her."

Hermione looked at him oddly. "You're right. She is immature. You know why? Because she's a child. She's eleven. Even if you were married in the future, isn't it a bit soon to be thinking about it now, even by wizarding standards?"

Harry shrugged. "There's nothing to think about. I love her, she likes me and she'll love me in a few years."

"You're not going to give her any say in the matter?" Hermione demanded hotly. "Just because in your timeline the two of you got together doesn't mean it will necessarily all end up the same way. You said you're making changes and you're different anyway. There's no guarantee that she'll want to marry you again."

"But Hermione, that's just it," Harry said softly. "We already are."

"Already are-?" Hermione looked faint. "What do you MEAN you're already married?"

Harry held up his hands placatingly. "It's not like I asked to be Soul Bonded to the love of my life, it just kind of happened. They're really rare you know. There have only been nine other recorded cases of Soul Bonds because it only forms between couples with the strongest and purest love."

"And…you and Ginny somehow qualify?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Somehow?" Harry looked offended.

"Harry, you're a thirty-year-old man – albeit one in a twelve-year-old body – lusting after an eleven-year-old. That sounds more like Lolita than Princess Bride to me," Hermione said candidly.

"You just don't understand," Harry said stiffly, crossing his arms.
"Yeah? Well neither does Ginny, it seems," Hermione shot back. "Are Soul Bonds even enough to legally wed people? Because this Ginny really had no choice in the matter. She didn't even get to say yes or no if you asked her out."

"You know, I honestly don't know," Harry mused. "We had a wedding anyway and we'll have a proper one again as I'm sure Molly will want to make a fuss out of her only daughter getting married. Again. What's so wrong about that?"

Hermione started a little at Harry's calling Mrs. Weasley 'Molly', but then, if she had been Harry's mother-in-law, it made sense, somewhat. "What's wrong is that you're making decisions for her without considering her feelings! Now she's going to feel like she's trapped into this relationship with a guy she barely knows and who's so much older than she is. She's going to wonder if she even really likes you or if she just feels like she should and if you really like her or the future her that you remember and constantly compare her to her alternate future self!"

"You've put a lot of thought into this," Harry noted mildly.

"You think that's a lot?" Hermione laughed. "Wait until you talk to Ginny. It's her life, after all, and she'll have years to obsess."

"Of COURSE I love her. She's Ginny, how could I not?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"Yeah…saying things like that really won't do much to convince anyone that you're not just trying to replace your dead wife with her younger counterpart," Hermione pointed out. Suddenly, a thought struck her. "Wait…if you're from the future…did the Chamber of Secrets not open when you were at Hogwarts?"

"Oh no, it did," Harry confirmed.

"Then you must have been so confused when the person you thought had the Diary didn't and you knew all the what's, why's, and how's but not the who…" Hermione trailed off as Harry started to look extremely guilty. "It…it wasn't Ginny last time, was it? Because if it was…why on Earth would you let it happen again?"

"Being…being possessed by Voldemort changed Ginny," Harry confessed. "It hurt her, yes, but it made her stronger. It turned her from a timid little girl into the wonderful woman that I fell in love with, the woman strong enough to be with the Chosen One even though Voldemort himself was gunning for me as well as every dark wizard in Britain. It killed me to watch her go through that, but it had to be done."

Chosen One? Hermione wondered vaguely. She had other things to worry about, though. "So…you let the girl you claim to love more than anything go through hell because you thought it would be 'good for her'?" Hermione couldn't believe it. "It's like…I don't even know you anymore," she said sadly. "There's got to be a way to break a Soul Bond…"

"Why would we want to do that?" Harry asked. "I'm quite happy with the current situation and as soon as Ginny calms down, she will be, too."

"This sounds like one of the most dysfunctional relationships I've heard of!" Hermione insisted. "You're manipulating everything so she'll 'fall in love' again and trying to mold her into the same person she was before instead of letting it happen naturally. She doesn't deserve that and you're going to make yourself crazy."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Harry demanded irritably.

"As far as Ginny is concerned?" Hermione took a deep breath. "Wait for her. Let her date other
people. Be her friend, not because you feel that's the best way to get into her pants but because you genuinely care about her. If the love you two shared in the future was as powerful and pure as you say it is, then maybe you'll find your way back to each other. And for God's sake, wait until she's at least fifteen or sixteen!"

Harry considered. "I'm not sure I can be that patient. I've just missed her so much…Still, for Ginny's sake, I suppose I can try."

"Thank God," Hermione sighed with relief. "I'm honestly not sure where you picked up such a skewed point of view. You were perfectly sane when I got petrified. You're utterly lost without me, huh?"

"More than you know…” Harry said, smiling at his long-time friend. "More than you know.”
"Hermione, what in the world are you doing?" Harry asked, watching his friend with no small degree of confusion.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Hermione asked tersely, rolling up some sort of knitted monstrosity and shoving it under one of the couches in the Common Room.

Harry was glad that they were the only two downstairs as this could very well prove to be one of those conversations. "Getting into the Easter spirit early but as the daughter of dentists are boycotting candy and so are hiding…whatever those are instead."

Hermione glared at him. "Very funny, Harry. I'm leaving hats out for the House Elves."

"Oh, is that what these are?" Harry asked innocently, taking one from the top of Hermione's pile and examining it closely.

"I…I've only recently taken up knitting, so I'm not very good yet," Hermione admitted, looking as pained as she always did when forced to face a flaw in herself.

"I can see that," Harry said mildly. "Might I suggest either taking lessons, using magic, or buying them instead?"

"They'll get better," Hermione insisted.

"I'm sure. Now why are you hiding these handmaid hats? If you're trying to get rid of them, there are easier ways. I mean, it might smell if you tried to burn them, but leaving them lying around means someone's sure to find them," Harry pointed out.

"Exactly," Hermione looked satisfied.

"You…want people to find them?" Harry asked, trying to make sure he was understanding this correctly. At Hermione's nod, he continued, "Then why hide them?"

"I don't want the others messing with them, these are just for the House Elves," Hermione explained.

"But Hermione, we're the only ones in the Common Room. I'm not going to take them and surely the House Elves will be by before morning," Harry said.

"How often do you think the House Elves come by?" Hermione wondered.

Harry shrugged. "Probably every night. After all, how many nights have you gone to bed with the Common Room looking like a mess and came down in the morning with it in pristine condition again? Or had your bed made when you had all the covers thrown on the floor? You think the students are going to be worrying about things like that? I mean, yeah, they could probably use magic to do it, but since they clearly don't why not make sure the House Elves at least serve a
purpose and have work to do."

"I suppose," Hermione agreed. "I just…this is really important to me and I don't want anything messing this up."

"That reminds me: why are you even giving House Elves hats anyway? The only House Elf I've ever met that likes clothes was Dobby and his primary interest is socks. If you don't like the fact that most of them wear rags, then hats really wouldn't fix that, now would it?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"Well, no, but I'm not trying to give the House Elves a sense of style, I'm trying to free them," Hermione said nobly.

"…come again?" Harry entreated.

"I'm trying to free the House Elves," Hermione repeated dutifully.

"HOW?" Harry wanted to know.

Now Hermione looked a little annoyed. "Honestly, Harry, you're the one who told me how it could be done! Someone gives the House Elf an article of clothing and they are free."

"Not just anyone, Hermione," Harry corrected. "Imagine how problematic that would be. They could never come into contact with any sort of apparel ever and...hey, how do they manage laundry if they can't deal with clothes?"

"I don't know Harry," Hermione said tersely. "But about your original point? Assuming, of course, that you even had one."

"Of course I had one!" Harry said, sounding highly affronted. "I was just saying that a House Elf can only be freed by their master."

"But you freed Dobby," Hermione pointed out.

"Because I wrapped Riddle's diary in my sock and gave it to Lucius Malfoy, who threw the sock and Dobby caught it. The fact it passed directly from Malfoy's hand to Dobby's means that it technically counted, even if Malfoy didn't exactly intend for it to go down that way," Harry clarified.

"I see..." Hermione looked put-out for a moment, then brightened. "Hey, the House Elves here are probably bound to the castle, right? Rather than a Headmaster who could die or retire at any time and wouldn't need enough House Elves to staff Hogwarts at his personal beck and call?"

"I...guess so," Harry allowed, wondering where this was going.

"Well, since I am a student at Hogwarts and they serve me, that makes me a partial master and I can save them!" Hermione exclaimed, looking very pleased with herself.

Harry just stared at the girl in shock. "I...don't quite think that it works that way, Hermione."

"Why not?" Hermione demanded. "It's just as if Malfoy had given a sock to Dobby."

"He did," Harry was a little confused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Draco Malfoy."

"Man, this whole calling multiple people from the same family by their surnames sure makes
"Man, this whole calling multiple people from the same family by their surnames sure makes conversation more difficult, doesn't it?" Harry asked idly. "And it's not the same thing at all. We do not own Hogwarts. The Headmaster and MAYBE the professors could do it. If we were able to free them, than that would be like if someone came to visit the Malfoys, gave Dobby their coat, and now Dobby's free," Harry continued the analogy.

"That would be a good thing," Hermione insisted.

"Possibly," Harry replied neutrally. "But that doesn't mean that that would work. If that were the case, everyone would accidentally be freeing their House Elves all over the place and no one would own any. And regardless of whether or not that would be a good thing," he raised his voice slightly as he saw Hermione looking ready to interrupt, "it clearly has not happened. Maybe it only works if the object passes directly from the owner to the House Elf? Because not doing laundry would be just such an obvious problem that…"

"Enough about the laundry," Hermione snapped. "Let's focus on my hats. They've been going missing so someone must take them."

"It might even be the House Elves," Harry conceded. "But think about it this way: if you really were managing to free House Elves left and right, then don't you think we would have heard about it? Maybe Dumbledore or McGonagall would make an announcement or ask that people stop giving the House Elves clothes?"

"But then more people would know about the slave labor regularly employed here at Hogwarts," Hermione sniffed. "And they wouldn't want that, now would they?"

"I will admit that I did not know that Hogwarts had House Elves either," Harry acknowledged. "But from the general tone of the conversation in which we found out that it does, it's not really a big secret. Everyone knows and we didn't because we were raised in the Muggle World and often don't know such basic things about wizarding life as their domestic help."

"Muggles don't enslave their domestic help!" Hermione insisted.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Even if you don't count the obvious example of them having slaves in the past, there's always indentured servants."

"People haven't done that for decades," Hermione countered.

"Well, the wizarding world does seem to be a bit behind the times, doesn't it?" Harry asked rhetorically. "I mean, for God's sake, they use quills and parchment! And candles! And by and large seem to be completely incapable of encountering anything even remotely Muggle without acting as if they are at either a zoo or a museum."

"Which is why we need to help bring them into the twentieth century," Hermione declared with renewed vigor.

Harry groaned. "No one but you seems to really care, Hermione. Maybe other Muggle-raised kids would, but the majority of students were raised in the wizarding world. And anyway, leave sweatshirts and things lying around the Common Room all the time. The House Elves don't seem to take them and attain freedom, so even if you could free the House Elves – which you can't – how would they know the hats are for them?"

Hermione opened her mouth then quickly shut it. "Good point," she admitted grudgingly. "Do you think I should leave a note, or-"

"And what guarantee that they would read it?" Harry interrupted. "Besides, you can't go around freeing House Elves. If you DID manage to accidentally do it, I'm sure the House Elves in
question would be pissed."

"But why?" Hermione wondered. "I'm trying to save them!"

"From Dumbledore?" Harry shot back. "I will admit that House Elf abuse does happen. Just look at Dobby and, I suppose to a certain extent, Winky."

"To a certain extent?" Hermione repeated, outraged. "He fired because she was scared and didn't want to stay at the scene of a Death Eater attack after making her save his seat in the top box that he didn't even end up showing up to claim when she was terrified of heights! He was absolutely terrible to poor Winky!"

"Two isolated incidents, one where he gets caught up in his work as an organizer for such a large, hidden gathering and the other after the Dark Mark had just been fired for the first time in thirteen years cannot possibly paint a clear picture of what their relationship was like," Harry objected. "But tell me this: if you're so convinced that Winky is better off without him, then why did you get so worked up when Crouch fired her?"

"Because it clearly…upset…her…" Hermione trailed off, realizing that wasn't exactly helping her case. "The blatant indoctrination that has her missing him sickens me," she said firmly.

"Yeah, it's horrible all right," Harry agreed absently. "But even though things like that do happen, I refuse to believe that Dumbledore would let them happen here. He is, by far, one of the most enlightened wizards I've met and I'm not entirely sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Either way, if anyone can be counted on to treat House Elves with the respect and dignity they deserve, it's Professor Dumbledore."

"I suppose you're right…" Hermione sighed. "But I have to do something!"

"Why?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"I mean, why do you have to do anything? Why can't you just learn more about the subject, let it alone for now, and then when you get older join the Ministry and try and get reform passed?" Harry asked reasonably.

"Because that will take years!" Hermione cried. "And I have to help them as soon as I can!"

"Your heart is in the right place, I know," Harry noted. "And I agree with you on principle that House Elf abuse like the kind Dobby so casually confessed to should be stopped but…I think you might be going about it the wrong way."

"I don't understand," Hermione confessed.

"Of course you don't," Harry sighed. "When you realized that Winky was happy with Crouch, what was your first reaction?"

"Societal indoctrination," Hermione supplied.

"Exactly," Harry nodded. "Regardless of whether that's true or not, Winky was happy. Other House Elves in other families are equally happy."

"They're slaves!" Hermione shouted.

"I understand that you view it that way but do you understand that they don't?" I'm not telling you
that you should just accept everything about the wizarding world but when you say that the House Elves are wrong to be happy with what they do and they must live their lives according to your ideals…do you have any idea how condescending that comes across as?” Harry demanded.

"Condescending?” Hermione repeated incredulously. "I just want to save them!"

"From themselves?” Harry inquired.

"It's not right,” Hermione insisted.

"Maybe you're right, I don't know,” Harry said appeasingly. "I've only ever met two House Elves: Dobby and Winky. I think that's all you've met, too. Two samples of a population are not enough to draw conclusions about the entire species."

"Without wages and benefits they are being exploited,” Hermione said firmly.

"Do House Elves even get sick?” Harry wondered.

"I don't know,” Hermione admitted.

"If they don't they don't need time off for it. Since they live with the family they work for I'm sure if they do fall ill, they'll have time to recover. And since all their food and board is paid for, what would they really need wages for?” Harry asked sensibly.

"Personal items,” Hermione replied promptly.

"I'm not sure if that's important to them or not,” Harry said. "It's not nearly as important as having their basic needs met, though, and not everyone can afford luxuries as it is. Plus, if they really don't like their situation, 'getting clothes' can't be all that difficult to do, although I've heard it’s very shameful. And from what I can tell, House Elves REALLY enjoy working. It's like a hobby to them or something."

"I don't understand what you think I'm doing wrong,” Hermione said honestly.

"You're plotting to make every House Elf you encounter homeless and starving,” Harry responded. "Without any thought for what happens to them after that."

"Then what do you suggest I do?” Hermione challenged, sounding a little peeved.

"Do your research,” Harry instructed. "Learn everything you can about House Elves, interview them, look into current legislation. And for the love of God, stop trying to 'save' people you know nothing about."

Hermione looked hurt. "I'm just-"

"Trying to help them, I know,” Harry finished gently. "That's why I want you to do it right."

"No more SPEW then, huh?” Hermione asked ruefully.

"Not the overbearing, in-your-face condescension from before, no,” Harry concurred.

"It was a stupid name, anyway.”
"Harry?" Hermione called out quietly, sticking her head into Harry's old dorm room.

"Hm?" Harry responded lazily. After defeating Voldemort and mourning, celebrating, and hiding from some of his more enthusiastic well-wishers all at once, he felt he was entitled to a little nap.

"Listen, I've just spoken with Professor McGonagall and we're both very concerned. We have to talk and we'd better do it soon before this becomes a serious issue. Is now a good time?" Hermione asked seriously.

Harry shrugged. "I guess. If it's about school, though, I ought to warn you: I consider the fact I didn't have to attend to be the only positive aspect of last year and I would have to be confounded in order to willing go back for another year."

Hermione gave a long-suffering sigh. "No, that's not what this is about. You really should reconsider, though. If you don't take seventh year than you can't take the NEWTs and then you're chances of being hired are-

"Hermione," Harry cut her off, yawning. "I'm Harry bloody Potter and I just managed to take down the most evil wizard in recent history…for the second time. I'm sure employability will be the least of my future worries."

"You probably just want to be a Quidditch player," Hermione sniffed.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'll be an Auror."

"I thought you said you had enough trouble for one lifetime," Hermione said, looking at him strangely. "Just a few hours ago, in fact."

"So I did," Harry acknowledged. "Which is why I want to be part of the force that hunts down and defeats evil before it can go out and conquer Britain."

"But if you want the Elder Wand's power to die with you, then don't you think you should choose a profession where you don't risk being disarmed every day?" Hermione asked sensibly.

"How many people could possibly know about the Elder Wand?" Harry asked rhetorically.

Hermione snorted. "You went on about it quite a bit when you were having your epic showdown with Voldemort so I'd say…everyone there. Even if the news doesn't spread – which it will – that's still quite a lot of people."

"Oh yeah, I kind of forgot about that," Harry said sheepishly. "Still, I'll be careful."

"I hate it when you say that…" Hermione moaned.

"What can you do?" Harry commiserated. "So what did you come up here for anyway? You said you and Professor McGonagall were concerned about me?"

"Ah, that's right," Hermione confirmed, her attention back on the matter at hand. "Harry, do you remember Crouch's first Defense Lesson in fourth year?"

Harry thought back. Insane Death Eater or not, Crouch had really known his way around the Dark Arts – probably because he was a bit of an enthusiast himself. "Um…let's see…something
about the Unforgiveable Curses?"

"Very good Harry," Hermione said, looking faintly pleased. "What do you know about them?"

"…Are you joking?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Just answer the question," Hermione allowed a little impatience to lace her tone.

"Okay…There’s the Imperius Curse which controls people, the Cruciatus Curse which tortures them, and Avada Kedavra which kills them. I’ve had them all cast on me multiple times and may very well be the only person alive to be able to claim that," Harry summarized.

"Excellent," Hermione praised. "Now, do you know WHY they are called Unforgivable Curses?"

"Because they could get you a one-way ticket to Azkaban?" Harry hazarded a guess.

"Under normal conditions, yes," Hermione agreed. "Although given you’re recent defeat of Voldemort and the regime changes going on, I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to suggest that for you."

"Wait, for me?" Harry asked, a bit alarmed. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you remember after Sirius died fifth year?" Hermione said instead, seemingly completely changing the topic.

"Yes…” Harry said, wondering if that was what she really wanted to talk about or if she was just cycling through topics.

"You said that you tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange, but it didn't work and she said that in order to use an Unforgivable you really had to mean it? Crouch said that too," Hermione noted.

"I guess," Harry said neutrally, still not getting it.

"I’m not sure about the Imperius Curse, but the emotions behind the other two seem pretty clear. You have to want whoever to die when you cast an Avada Kedavra to die – although I suppose it doesn't have to be personal as Wormtail killed Cedric and he didn't even know him as anything but 'the spare' – and wanting the person to really, truly suffer when you cast the Cruciatus Curse,” Hermione recapped.

"Is there a point to this?" Harry demanded. "But I was having a really nice nap, you know."

"Of course there's a point," Hermione insisted, looking a little insulted that he would doubt her.

"Then if you wouldn't mind getting to it?" Harry suggested.

"They're called 'Unforgivables' for a reason," Hermione pointed out. "They represent the three worse things you could do to a person: taking their control, torturing them, and killing them. You couldn't use the Unforgivables on Bellatrix after you had just watched her murder your godfather. Two years later…not so much. I mean, I understand at the bank. I do, really."

"Good," Harry said. "Because even if we probably could have come up with a less illegal, dangerous, and untested way of dealing with the Goblin and that other Death Eater, we were kind of pressed for time and panicked."

"Exactly," Hermione nodded. "And I cast an Unforgivable, too. I regret it, but since it was the fate
of all of Britain at stake – at the very least – I'm more-or-less okay with it."

"So what's the problem?" Harry wondered.

"Professor McGonagall said that when she first discovered you were in the school, she was arguing with that Carrow Death Eater who was teaching this year. The guy said that you were in the school and she said you weren't that stupid," Hermione began.

"Clearly, she was wrong," Harry smirked.

"Oh so very wrong," Hermione agreed. "Apparently he spit on her and so you used the Cruciatus Curse on him."

"That sounds about right," Harry nodded.

"And that doesn't seem…a little…WRONG to you?" Hermione probed tentatively.

Harry shook his head. "No, why would it?"

"You managed to cast a successful Cruciatus Curse on him, which meant that you really truly wanted him to suffer," Hermione pointed out.

"You already said that," Harry reminded her.

"All because he spit on Professor McGonagall?" Hermione continued to recap.

"He had no right," Harry declared, his eyes flashing. "She deserves more respect that that and I can't believe you're even questioning that!"

"Oh, I'm not," Hermione assured him. "And maybe if you'd been here this year and soon all the atrocities we've only just begun to hear about and then that was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, I could understand that but Harry…that was your only contact with the man. You saw him insulting Professor McGonagall."

"I know," Harry acknowledged. "But it had to be done."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"I just told you, Hermione; weren't you listening?" Harry asked, slightly annoyed at having to repeat himself. "He spat on Professor McGonagall. Hell, you even mentioned what happened before I did, so shouldn't you know that?"

"I do know it," Hermione protested. "I just still don't get why you thought a little animosity between two people who hate each other was worth pain personified."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It was a very intense situation and even though she kind of had to put up with that kind of thing to be able to keep the students at Hogwarts at least minimally safe, I didn't and so therefore I wouldn't. Besides, it was just the one time!"

"It's kind of a slippery slope, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "Fourth year you never would have dreamed of trying it, fifth year you tried and didn't succeed, sixth year you tried and either missed or didn't manage to complete it, I don't remember, and this year you've managed two of the three."

"It was a combat situation," Harry defended. "The war is over it won't happen again. Besides, during the last war Aurors were given permission to start using them."

"You're not an Auror, Harry," Hermione gently reminded him.
"Maybe not, but I will be!" Harry vowed. "Not to mention that I had that stupid prophecy hanging over my head meaning everyone figured I'd do it sooner or later."

"And even if in combat situations or if you needed to interrogate someone the Unforgivables might be understandable, you just did it because you were offended!" Hermione said ruefully. "If you went around hexing everyone who offended you than what would...no, wait, Ginny does it too...it's the equivalent of punching someone in the face every time they annoyed you. Or, in the case of the two Unforgivables you've managed to work, sleep and sense-depriving them until they're malleable and/or using high voltage shocks on them."

"Ginny doesn't go around hexing people whenever they annoy her!" Harry defended his sort-of-ex.

"She does whenever Zacharias Smith is around," Hermione muttered.

"To be fair, he is really annoying," Harry reminded her.

"To be fair, that has nothing to do with anything," Hermione shot back. "What about all the times you've been annoyed or offended? Like whenever I make you do homework or people start crying or you even see Malfoy...hell, you nearly got us killed rescuing him, you can't possibly have done it just so you could torture him whenever you ran across each other!"

"I'm not saying that I would," Harry insisted.

"But it was okay to do it when you were annoyed then but not whenever you may get irritated in the future...why, exactly?" Hermione pressed.

"Alright, alright! I get it! I was wrong and I won't do it again," Harry conceded.

Hermione smirked at him. "Good boy."

Harry mock-glared at her. "What about Professor McGonagall? Did she tell you that after I revealed myself she let loose with an Imperio of her own and forced him to tie himself up and stay out of the way?"

"She did," Hermione confirmed. "And while I agree that there were much better ways of handling the situation, she DID just learn that the most wanted person in Britain had just snuck into the Death Eater stronghold Hogwarts had become for no apparent purpose, so I'll give her the same lenience I gave us for our Gringott's exploit."

"...now that our little moral dilemma is settled...can I go back to sleep now?" Harry begged.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly!"
The World's Worst Taste in Jewelry

Chapter Notes

The idea for this chapter came from Saigo. Thanks for the inspiration.

"What are we going to do with it?" Hermione asked, eyeing the locket Horcrux warily.

"Keep it safe till we work out how to destroy it," Harry replied, slipping it around his neck.

"...What are you doing?" Hermione asked him.

"Keeping it safe," Harry replied as if it were obvious.

"By wearing it?" Hermione said. "Harry, that thing is a fraction of the single most evil wizard around's very soul that he managed to siphon off by killing someone in cold blood! That doesn't sound like a very good idea to me. Ron, does that sound like a very good idea to you?"

Ron shook his head vehemently. "That sounds like quite possibly the worst idea we've had besides not keeping weeks worth of food with us at all times for when we inevitable had to flee."

"Most things are perishable, Ron," Hermione pointed out. "And besides, if we took too much your mother was just going to get paranoid again."

"Yeah, you're right," Ron sighed. "I still can't believe she honestly thought giving us extra housework and not letting us spend time together would stop us from leaving…"

Hermione just shrugged. "Well, she was worried and panic makes people irrational."

Harry coughed something that sounded suspiciously like 'Monica and Wendell Wilkins' but Hermione ignored him.

"Seriously, Harry, if even Ron agrees with me that that's a stupid idea then you know that it is something that you should not do under any circumstances," she said seriously.

"Hey!" Ron protested. He, too, was ignored.

"I understand that it's evil and could very well affect us," Harry said calmly. "But what am I supposed to do? We can't just leave the Horcrux lying around. If we lose it, if it gets stolen, all hope is lost. This is our ONLY shot. The only thing that's standing in the way of You-know-who and the chance to lord over the whole world forever."

"I appreciate that, Harry," Hermione replied, equally calm. "But how in the world do you expect that we'll lose it? As you said, this little locket is probably the most important thing we have right now so there's no way we could possibly misplace it. As for it being stolen...we're in the middle of the woods and we're going to move every night. We're going to try and avoid people as much as possible, so the odds of that happening are just astronomical. Besides, if we do meet anyone with ill intent, I'm sure robbery will be the last thing on their minds..."

"It doesn't matter how likely or not it is, Hermione," Harry said firmly. "We can't take that chance. It doesn't matter if the odds are a million to one, if this is that one time, then we're still dead."
"I never said we should leave it out," Hermione pointed out. "I have with me a bag charmed to be able to fit everything I may possibly need. If I slip the locket in there then no one will be able to just make off with it and since we won't be able to make it without my bag as it is, there's no way I'm letting it out of my sight."

"You can't wear your bag like you would the locket," Harry countered. "Unless the chain breaks, the locket is definitely staying with you and you can't say that for your bag."

"I think it's worth the risk," Hermione decided.

Harry's eyes bulged out. "What could possibly make it worth the risk or losing possession of this Horcrux? Especially after we sacrificed so much to get it? Especially after Dumbledore DIED to retrieve it?"

Hermione winced. Even if Dumbledore hadn't exactly found the Horcrux, he'd found Regulus's replacement, which led them to Kreacher, which led them to Mundungus, which led them to Umbridge and the real Horcrux. "Ginny."

Harry froze. "What about her?"

"Remember second year?" Hermione demanded. "Our first encounter with a Horcrux? You saw what that diary did to her, Harry. You know more than anyone besides her. It was slowly sucking her soul out all year and in the end it damn near killed her. If you weren't such a walking deus ex machina, she would be long dead by now. Even if we won't have to deal with a basilisk this time – probably – do you really want to risk strengthening the Horcrux to the point that it steals one of our lives to bring itself to life? Especially given how dire the situation is?"

"We can switch off," Harry suggested. "I can wear it a third of the time and so can you and Ron."

"Oh, that's just brilliant, Harry," Hermione said sarcastically. "That way it has three lives to leech off of and if we're lucky maybe we'll all be alive when it comes to life to kill us all. Because God knows that if we're having difficulty destroying a locket, imagine how hard it will be to take on a mini-you-know-who who we also can't destroy?"

"Riddle said that was because Ginny poured her heart and soul into his diary," Harry reminded her. "So the way I see it, as long as none of us hold lengthy confessionals with the locket, we should be okay."

"Harry, I don't quite think that we can assume that the two Horcruxes are going to work the exact same way," Hermione said patiently. "Especially since one of them was a diary which has as its sole purpose being written in and a locket doesn't. Especially a locket that can't be opened like this one. Also, You-know-who was 16 or so when he created that first one and considerably older when he created this one. He's probably gotten better at making them and the Horcrux, if for no other reason than because it's evil and wants to feed off our life force, and so it's going to find a way to do so. What is a locket designed for? Being worn. How do you know that by doing that you're not doing the equivalent of Ginny writing in that diary?"

"Because…that wouldn't…" Harry began. "Come on, really? Wouldn't someone have realized that the locket felt evil and was possibly trying to feed off their soul before if this was the case?"

"Before us, the only ones to have it were Regulus, Mundungus, and Umbridge," Ron piped up, looking up from Harry's copy of Quidditch Through the Ages that he'd been thumbing through while trying to stay out of the argument. "And Umbridge was most likely the only one to wear it and God knows she's soulless."
"While I acknowledge that that could very well be the case," Hermione deadpanned, "in case it's not, I'm not sure why she didn't notice. She was spending lengthy amounts of time around Dementors, maybe she thought that was the reason. And even if she did notice, she probably thought a little discomfort was worth the status boost the locket gave her. And what was she supposed to think it meant, anyway? Horcruxes aren't exactly common knowledge and she had no reason to suspect that to be one. I mean, who honestly has the gall to turn one of the founder's heirlooms into a personal storage container for their soul?"

"You-know-who," Harry replied promptly. "And if Umbridge, of all people, can risk – and fail, by the way – bringing you-know-who's Horcrux to life, shouldn't we risk it for the sake of destroying it for good?"

"Well, we could," Hermione agreed. "Except that it may very well have stored up some life energy from her, she wouldn't have worn it every minute of every day like you're proposing we do, and she didn't know the risks. We do."

"It's worth it," Harry said stubbornly.

"No, it's not," Hermione insisted. "We're on the run here. It was bad enough before when we were basically isolated but at least then Remus COULD stop by, even if your little temper tantrum ensured he probably wouldn't. We had a safe place to stay and be reasonably shielded from the Death Eaters. Now not only are you the most wanted person in Britain, I'm a fugitive for not reporting myself to the Ministry to have my soul sucked out, and Ron's supposed to be at home sick or at Hogwarts, but we have little supplies and no plan to either destroy this Horcrux or find the others. Why in the world would you want to make the situation worse by introducing an object of evil that at the very least makes you in a permanent bad mood? We're going to be stressed out enough as it is for the next few who knows how long we're going to be out here."

"I think I can handle my emotions, Hermione," Harry said defiantly, crossing his arms.

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances.

"You know," Ron said quickly, "I really think you're onto something here, Hermione. This is SUCH a bad idea, I can't believe we were even considering it."

Harry shot his so-called best friend a withering glare. "Very funny."

"Who's joking?" Ron shot back.

"Hey, let's do a simple test to see if the locket is affecting you and whether you can handle it if it is," Hermione suggested.

Harry considered that for a moment. He knew he was fine, but what could it hurt? "Alright," he agreed. "I'm game."

"You've been wearing that locket for about twenty minutes or so now," Hermione informed him. "Now I want you to take it off."

Harry frowned. "Hermione, I don't think that's such a-"

"Just for a minute," Hermione urged. "So you can see if you can feel any noticeable differences. It's simple enough. Unless, of course, you know you will but don't want to admit it."

"Fine," Harry agreed reluctantly, slipping the locket slowly off of his neck and setting it down on the bottom of the tent right in front of him. Immediately, Harry felt free and strangely light. The clammy feeling he hadn't even realized he was experiencing and the heavy weight on his stomach
were gone. "Wow. I…wow."

"Does this mean you agree?" Hermione asked, a trifle smug.

Harry nodded. "There is no way in hell I'm putting that thing on again."
"Hermione, can I talk to you for a second?" Harry asked once he, Ron, and Hermione had reached the Common Room after their first meeting of Dumbledore’s Defense Army Association.

"Sure," Hermione said readily. "About the DA?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "My dorm should be empty right now since Seamus is down here and the other three were with us."

Once Harry and Hermione were safely up in Harry's dorm – Ron had elected to play chess with Seamus – she turned to him. "So how do you think it went? I think it went rather well, especially considering this was only our first meeting. I mean, Zacharias Smith is pretty unpleasant and I don't actually think that friend of Cho's really wants to be there, but everyone seemed to get the spell by the end."

"Yeah, it went great," Harry agreed. "Although I'm not quite sure why Luna only did the spell half the time and was magically playing with Justin's hair the rest of the time, but that's Luna for you, isn't it?"

"Most definitely," Hermione nodded.

"There's nothing to be done about Zacharias; if he wants to be a prat, let him. I don't think he'll try and turn us in, so we can put up with a little doubt. Marietta, though…Cho said her mom works at the Ministry and doesn’t want her antagonizing Umbridge at all. Considering that if Cho hadn't come up with 'DA' and Ginny hadn't found something better for it to stand for we would probably would be going around calling ourselves the 'Anti-Umbridge League' like Angelina suggested, she probably shouldn't be here. I can't exactly tell Cho that, though, as she would never believe that her friend would betray us or she wouldn't have brought her and she may very well stop showing up if Marietta does so…do we have any safeguards against tattling?" Harry inquired.

"I enchanted the paper everyone signed to give them a rather nasty case of long-lasting boils that spells out the word 'Sneak'," Hermione told him. "That way if we are betrayed then we'll all know who did it."

"But it won't prevent us from being betrayed nor will it serve as a preventative measure as no one knows about it," Harry pointed out.

"How do you think they'd react if they knew we didn't trust them?" Hermione countered.

"Point," Harry conceded. "But I still feel we should do something more. We could get in a lot of trouble if we're found out and while I'm fully willing to risk it, we shouldn't make it easy for Umbridge to find us."

"What do you suggest then?" Hermione asked.
"We should ask them to make some sort of magical oath that they will not knowingly and/or willingly betray us," Harry suggested. "The penalty for doing that could be similar to the 'Sneak' idea, something long-lasting and humiliating but ultimately not harmful."

"And if they refuse to take the oath?" Hermione asked.

"Then they're out of the DA," Harry said simply. "We should probably modify their memories as well as the only real reason they would refuse is if they weren't certain whether they would at some point in time give us up knowingly and/or willingly and do not want to face the consequences."

"Alright," Hermione said slowly. "I don't really know much about memory modification but I can look into it."

"Good," Harry said, relieved. "You'd be better at it than me and every time I think of memory modification, I have flashbacks to Lockhart and the Chamber of Secrets, so…"

"Why do you keep saying 'knowingly and/or willingly'?" Hermione inquired.

"If they truly accidentally blow it – say they don't realize that someone else is around – or if they are forced to via that mind reading that Dumbledore and Snape always seem to do or via Veritaserum, they shouldn't be treated as horrendous betrayers," Harry explained.

"Good point," Hermione acknowledged. "I don't really think accidentally slipping up and talking about it will be much of a problem, though, since we're calling it the 'DA' just for that purpose. Unless they're REALLY obvious, in which case they might just deserve to be hexed for their stupidity."

"Now, now Hermione," Harry chastised. "Even though everyone else seems to think hexing people for being annoying is alright, it really is the magical equivalent of punching someone in the face."

"I know," Hermione sighed. "So was that it or was there something else you wanted to discuss."

"Actually, there was," Harry informed her. "In fact, that was the main reason I asked you up here: the charmed paper with all of our names on it."

"What about it?" Hermione asked quizzically.

"You wrote 'Dumbledore's Army' at the top of it," Harry reminded her.

"So I did," she acknowledged. "This is a problem…why?"

"Because Fudge already thinks Hogwarts is Dumbledore's personal magical boot camp; what do you think he would do if he got his hands on some so-called 'proof'?" Harry demanded.

"There's no way he'd find out Harry," Hermione said. "The paper is back in the Room of Requirements."

"And you think they can't get in?" Harry challenged. "I mean, I doubt 'I want to see what Harry's using the Room for' will work, but if there is a betrayal and they know exactly what to look for? If someone betrays us then they'll already know how to get in and if they act before we get a chance to make everyone swear an oath or forget everything, they won't even realize that there will be any magical repercussions for them until it's too late. Or hell, whoever betrays us could take the list with them and then we might as well announce to the world that we're up to something the Ministry doesn't approve of."
"It's just a piece of paper with the word 'Dumbledore's Army' at the top," Hermione argued. "That's hardly any conclusive proof."

"Ah, but you forget, Hermione: my name is on that list," Harry told her. "And as I'm just as likely to be attempting to overthrow the Ministry and destabilize Magical Britain in their eyes, they need to take this doubly seriously as it is no doubt a conspiracy between us. Besides," he added sardonically, "since when does the Ministry ever need proof?"

"So you're saying that Dumbledore could take some heat for this? Heat that he doesn't need?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. "Among other things. There's no way they will let him remain in charge of Hogwarts if they receive ANY confirmation whatsoever that he might be trying to turn us into weapons. They're not going to be able to arrest him and take him to Azkaban, it just can't happen. Dumbledore WOULD leave to protect us, though, from the Ministry's attacking Hogwarts or trying to shut it down or whatnot."

"Or to protect us directly by taking responsibility for our list," Hermione said quietly. "Seeing as how it says 'Dumbledore's Army' instead of 'Harry Potter's Army.'"

"Exactly," Harry said grimly. "And if we think things are bad now…Umbridge still won't cross Dumbledore directly; she's terrified of him. Even with all the bad press and doubts as to his sanity going around, he still seems strangely untouchable. If he's out of the way, then what's to stop Umbridge from going mad with power?"

"McGonagall would still be..." Hermione began but Harry interrupted her.

"McGonagall would do her best, but she would be far easier to dislodge than Dumbledore," he said sensibly. "And what if she is forced out too and then Flitwick, Sprout, whoever? What if all of our actual, competent teachers are replaced with Ministry stooges who are willing to sacrifice a generation's education just to keep some sort of vague paranoia at bay?"

Hermione, of course, had no great love for anyone who would knowingly sabotage education. "I can understand why they insist that we have no need to defend ourselves against our fellow wizards – even if that's a load of bollocks even just here at school – but Umbridge seems to have quite a bit of freedom in deciding what she wants to teach or not teach. You'd think that – given her disgraceful views of non-humans – she would at the very least do what Lupin did third year and try and help us to defend against dark creatures. Even if we had to deal with her prejudiced spin on the subject, at least it wouldn't be a total loss yet she just has us learning theory. And if we take our wands out," she shook her head ruefully. "She's even more against that than Snape and he teaches us the subject we're most likely to die in..."

"Yeah," Harry shook her head. "I think she might actually be more worthless as a teacher than Lockhart. I mean, granted we learned nothing either year, but at least Lockhart was good for a laugh. And I did learn my signature move 'Expelliarmus' due to that dueling club of his."

"So I suppose you're right," Hermione said, sighing heavily. "As much as I want to be able to proudly announce to the world that we're taking it upon ourselves to receive a proper education and trying to get ready for the war that's coming, I know we can't. Fist thing tomorrow, I'm start researching oaths and memory manipulation and I'm definitely taking 'Dumbledore's Army' off the top of the paper."

"That's all I ask, Hermione," Harry said with a small smile. "If we're going to get caught, I'd rather Umbridge had to at least put a little effort into it..."
"It would have been nice, you know, to win the House Cup just once before I left," one of the apparently seventh-year Gryffindors was saying as Harry entered the Common Room. "I had such high hopes when McGonagall told us about it way back in first year but Slytherin always somehow seemed to win."

"I know," another seventh-year agreed. "This year it actually felt like we had a chance, you know. Until SOMEBODY went ahead and decided to play dragon smuggler."

Harry was mildly grateful that no one really believed that was what he was doing as he didn't want to get Hagrid in trouble – even if he was an adult and should really take more responsibility for his actions – but enough was really enough. It had been a little less than a month already and the hate the three-fourths of the school and mockery of the other fourth was not dying down in the slightest.

Draco, of course, was a hero in Slytherin for despite costing them 50 points himself, he had successfully put Gryffindor House out of the running for the House Cup almost single-handedly. Hermione and Neville, on the other hand…Neville had been having a breakdown twice a week since that night and Hermione was seriously starting to consider transferring. Harry, meanwhile, was well-used to being hated but was kind of tired of the lack of originality. Clearly, action must be taken.

"Alright," Harry said loudly. Immediately, all attention turned to him. Not that it was ever actually off of him, per se, but now it was undivided. "I'm calling a House meeting. Get everyone to gather down here."

"Why should we listen to you, Potter?" A second-year Harry thought might be named Cormac sneered. "You really screwed us over, you know."

"I am well aware you all feel that way," Harry said calmly. "Which is why we need to talk. If you don't want to be there, fine. You'll just never know what could possibly be so important I need the whole House to hear it."

The gossip potential being what it was, the entirety of the Gryffindor House was assembled before Harry in less than ten minutes.

"I'm not sure this is quite allowed," Percy said sternly. "After all, you're only a first year and only the Heads of House, Head Girl or Boy, and Prefects are supposed to call House meetings."

"It won't be an official meeting, then," Harry said dismissively. "Now be honest, who here is pissed at me?"

Everyone but Hermione, Neville, Ron, and surprisingly Oliver Wood – who really only seemed to
care about the Quidditch Cup – raised their hands.

"That's what I thought," Harry said. He wished he could call Hermione up there to assist him as she was far better at this kind of thing that he was, but she was still stubbornly refusing to draw any attention to herself. Maybe once he got going she'd open up more and lend a hand. "My question for you is this: Why?"

"Why?" Alicia sputtered. "Why? Slytherin has won the House Cup six years in a row. This was a year to break that tradition. For US to break that tradition and you…you went ahead and ruined it."

"Well, it wasn't on purpose," Harry defended. "Hermione and I had something we needed to do and we got caught on the way back down. Draco Malfoy found out we'd be out and started telling people we had a dragon of all things. Neville, I guess, heard him and wasn't able to warn us before we snuck out for some reason and so he tried to catch up with us to let us know and got in trouble as well. Now, I get that sneaking out after curfew is against school rules but what's the usual punishment for that?"

"Detention and anywhere from ten to twenty points deducted per person," one of the Weasley twins replied promptly.

"Unless it's Snape that does the catching and then it's anyone's guess what will happen," the other added.

"McGonagall seemed to think that Hermione and I – me maybe she could understand because of my animosity towards Malfoy, but Hermione? Miss 'We could have died or, worse, have been expelled'? – fed Malfoy that dragon story and thought it was funny Neville believed us," Harry shook his head sadly. "McGonagall's a good teacher, but she really doesn't get children, does she? And I can't say much for her character-judging abilities, either. Even IF Hermione and I were to tell Malfoy something about a dragon and he believed us, why would we put ourselves at risk and be wandering around instead of just reporting that he would be out of bed? And if Malfoy was talking about it when Neville overheard, how was that our fault he was out? And why would we think it was funny that a friend of ours got in trouble because of us?"

"It's all well and good that you didn't mean to do it," Lee Jordan spoke up. "But the fact remains that you lost 150 bloody points in one night! That's the kind of thing you'd expect from a murder attempt, not a bunch of stupid first years."

"Exactly!" Harry agreed. "Three students wandering around after hours, one of them with clearly only the best of intentions and what do we get? A detention in the Forbidden Forest and fifty points from each of us? I swear, it's like we're the only students to ever be caught out after curfew. Talk about a disproportionate reaction…"

"I think it was the fact it was you four all out at once," Katie suggested.

"What should it matter if it was two of us or twenty? The infraction was the same so the same punishment should be given out in either case," Harry insisted. "And why are you still so upset about this? It was nearly a month ago!"

"Because we haven't been able to make up the point difference," Lavender said as if it were obvious.

"But who really cares?" Harry asked.

"We do!" several people shouted.
"But why? Why do you all want to win the House Cup so badly?" Harry pressed.

"So the stinking Slytherins don't get it," Ron answered.

"What, exactly, is the House Cup awarded for? Percy?" Harry looked to the older boy.

"The House Cup is awarded to the House with the most points. Points are awarded for achievements made by members of the House and taken away for rule-breaking and disrespecting teachers," Percy replied promptly.

"And the House Cup is a trophy that the Head of House of the winning House gets to keep in their office for a year along with a lot of bragging rights. We get bragging rights, too, but aside from that what do we get out of winning?" Harry inquired.

"...The end of the year feast would be in Gryffindor colors instead of Slytherin one," Angelina offered.

"True, not seeing Slytherin colors would be a plus," Harry conceded. "But would it be worth it? Really?"

"Worth WHAT?" Seamus wanted to know.

"You get 'points' for doing what the teachers want you to do and lose them for annoying them and stepping out of line. Basically, they're bribing us all year to be model students and we don't even get anything out of it!" Harry said indignantly.

"House points given for following the rules and taken away for not following them..." one of the Weasley twins mused.

"And people are always making sure they don't go too far so as not to lose too many points," the other concluded. "By God, Fred, we've been gypped!"

The twin that was therefore probably George gasped. "I can't believe we've been so blind!"

"I can believe you just said that!" Hermione burst out, flushing when everyone's attention turned to her.

"Said what?" probably-George asked, confused. "That we've been blind?"

"No, 'gypped'," Hermione corrected.

"What's wrong with saying that?" Most-Likely-Fred asked. "We've been cheated and I was just saying so."

"Don't you realize how racist that is?" Hermione demanded.

"No, and we don't care," Fred said bluntly.

"Percy might," George added helpfully.

"So what you're saying is that the teachers are basically brainwashing us through a useless competition with no real prize into not getting into too much trouble," Katie summarized.

"That is absolutely what I'm saying," Harry agreed. "And they're quite good at it, too. Why else would not only my own House but two others be so pissed at me for putting us behind? And honestly, if Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff want Slytherin to lose so badly, they should try getting some points themselves. I mean, Hermione used to get points for her brilliance every time she..."
walked into a classroom where the teacher was alive and not Snape so why haven't the Ravenclaws taken advantage of this?"

"That's actually a good question," Dean remarked.

"Yeah, and now they're acting like it's inevitable that Slytherin's going to win again," Parvati noted. "No wonder they never do."

"This isn't the case at all, Harry," Percy objected. "The House Cup system isn't trying to bribe you; it's merely an encouragement to do well and a discouragement to do things you aren't supposed to."

The twins exchanged glances. "Okay, now I'm positive that this whole 'House Cup' thing is evil," one said.

"With Percy's approval, it must be," the other concurred.

Percy glared at them but said nothing.

"Hey, this means we're free to do whatever we feel like doing without having to worry about anything besides detention since our peers won't hate us for trying to blow up the Slytherin Common Rooms again," Lee realized.

"So you see, it really is more of a 'suck-up' cup than a House one. And do any of us REALLY want to be suck-ups?" Harry asked rhetorically.

Now looking rather mutinous and not a little gleeful, the House of Gryffindor assured them they did not.

In the end, Dumbledore was forced to give them 837 points to give them a victory over Slytherin.
"So Harry, it's been about two weeks since we got the Locket Horcrux from Umbridge," Hermione said casually.

"And embarked on the camping trip from hell," Ron added helpfully.

"Right," Hermione nodded. "And while Ron and I respect your need to save all the melodrama for June or the end of May so you'll make sure to bag the House Cup, we wanted to make sure you realized that due to the fact we're on the run, we're not actually enrolled in Hogwarts right now, so there's no way we're going to get points for this."

Harry tried to exchange a confused look with Ron, but the redhead was nodding along to Hermione. "I know that," Harry insisted, feeling even more lost.

"So you can feel free to have another 'vision' and realize where the Horcrux is any day now," Hermione concluded.

"Hermione, my visions don't work like that and even if they did you seems to think if I have them, it will put me in danger or some – wait," Harry said suddenly. "Did you just put the word 'vision' in air quotes?"

"Maybe," Hermione admitted.

"You still don't believe in visions after all this time?" Harry demanded.

"Can you blame me?" Hermione asked rhetorically. "The only 'Seer' – and yes, that was in air quotes as well – is Trelawney. It's been four years and you've yet to die, Harry."

"That could change any day now," Ron pointed out.

"Your faith is touching," Harry said dryly. "Hermione, while I do acknowledge that Trelawney isn't the most…reliable Seer, how can you not believe in visions? Trelawney herself saw both Pettigrew's escape and You-Know-Who is only after me because of them."

"If we hadn't gotten involved, Sirius would have killed Pettigrew, been able to prove he hadn't blown him up by virtue of providing his corpse, might have been able to get off by showing Dumbledore Pettigrew's Dark Mark if he had one then, and Pettigrew never would have gone on to bringing You-Know-Who back," Hermione countered.

"Yeah, I know Dumbledore said that there might come a day I was grateful that I saved him, but seeing as how according to You-Know-Who's own epic monologue, if it hadn't been for him I would have been much older when he returned and far better equipped to defeating You-Know-Who so even should Wormtail sacrifice himself to save me or whatever – not bloody likely – it wouldn't have needed to be done if I had a few more years to prepare," Harry noted.

"What's up with you calling him 'Pettigrew'?" Ron queried.

Hermione blinked at him. "Well, that is his name. What am I supposed to call him? Peter?"

Ron shook his head vigorously. "Don't be silly; you're supposed to call him 'Wormtail.' Hell, according to Harry even You-Know-Who does that."

"So…instead of calling him by his proper name, we're supposed to call him by the name that
Harry’s father, Sirius, and Remus gave him as a fellow Marauder? Shouldn’t he have, oh, I don’t know, lost the right to go by that name when he betrayed everyone?” Hermione asked. "And You-Know-Who probably only does it to remind Pettigrew how he threw everyone over so he’s the only option Pettigrew still has."

"Yes, absolutely," Ron said seriously.

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "Oh, and if You-Know-Who wasn't paranoid about the prophecy he wouldn't have hunted down your parents and killed them. He might have killed them anyway as they were part of the Order of the Phoenix, but you wouldn't have had to go live with the Dursley's for your 'protection.' Oh, and just because You-Know-Who tried to fulfill the prophecy as he understood it does not, in fact, mean it was real."

"Look, Hermione, I get that you really really have a deep-seated hatred for mysticism and all, but weren't we supposed to be talking to Harry about his ridiculous procrastination?" Ron piped up.

"What? Oh yes," Hermione nodded. "So when are we going to get moving on the next Horcrux?"

Harry shot her a sideways look. "Whenever I have some sort of epiphany on where it is. Or, in some cases, what. Or, you know, you guys could brainstorm, too."

"Okay," Hermione sighed. "I've tried to be subtle about this. And then I tried being less subtle. That didn't work either so now I'm just going to spell it out for you: we know that you know where the other Horcruxes are and even though we have no viable plan of getting rid of them-

"I say we throw them at Dementors," Ron interrupted.

"Throw the Horcruxes at Dementors?" Harry repeated. "That might work, but where could we find a Dementor?"

"They're breeding in the streets, Harry; I'm sure we'll stumble across one eventually," Ron said. "Or hell, we could find an Auror we can trust or someone who fought in the last war and get them to use the killing curse. Too bad Moody's dead and Harry alienated Remus."

"I regret nothing about that conversation," Harry said stubbornly.

"Well…we'll worry about that after we get the next Horcrux," Hermione decided.

"We may as well worry about that now as it may be awhile before we get the next Horcrux," Harry confided.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Harry: give it up."

"Give what up?" Harry asked, genuinely baffled.

"We know that you know where all of the Horcruxes are and we want to go after them now in case we have any complications or You-Know-Who decides to visit them or something and notices they're gone and decides to move them," Hermione explained.

Harry stared at her. "That sounds like a brilliant idea, Hermione, except for one tiny flaw?"

Hermione frowned. "Flaw? Is one of the Horcruxes hidden somewhere that can only be accessed at certain times of the year?"

"I have no idea, Hermione, and that's just it: I. Have. No. Idea. Where. The Horcruxes. Are," Harry said slowly, seeing as how his friends apparently hadn't gotten it the last ten times they'd
asked.

"Yeah, we get it Harry: no one's supposed to know that you know about Horcruxes and pretending not to have any idea where they are is great for fooling people who might suspect that you're after them," Ron said knowingly. "Hermione explained it to me. We're your best friends, though, and we're not going to go telling everyone where they are."

"I know you wouldn't," Harry agreed. "And I would love to tell you where the Horcruxes are."

"Then why won't you?" Ron pressed.

"Because I have no idea where they are!" Harry insisted.

Hermione laughed incredulously. "What, you honestly expect us to believe that Dumbledore sent a seventeen-year-old boy off on a journey to single-handedly make You-Know-Who mortal again and then destroy him with only two fellow really-should-be-at-Hogwarts-right-now friends and without not only any clear means of destroying the Horcruxes but any idea where to look for them, either?"

"Well, it's not like he had much time to prepare," Harry defended his mentor. "After all, Snape's betrayal – while anyone with half a brain and lacking rose-tinted glasses could see coming – was very sudden and so he didn't get a chance to tell me where he thought everything was. And as he said, it took him over a year to find the ring and he kept leaving last year to look for the locket. If he knew where the other Horcruxes were, chances are he wouldn't just leave them for me to try my hand on like those trials first year."

"I suppose that's true," Hermione admitted grudgingly. "But...you HAVE to know something. You just have to!"

"Well," Harry considered. "I know that there are six of them, I know one is most likely Nagini, one is the locket, one was the ring, one was the diary, one is Hufflepuff's cup, and one is something of Ravenclaw's. The diary and ring are already gone and the locket is ours, so that's two-and-a-half out of six down."

"And you have no idea where any of these things are?" Hermione asked again, disbelief evident in her voice.

"I just said that, Hermione," Harry pointed out.

"...How in the world are we supposed to do this?" Hermione demanded, sounding slightly panicked. "They could be anywhere..."

Harry shook his head. "According to Dumbledore, it's just like how he insisted on using all high-profile objects to house his soul: he's a snob and he wants his soul to be housed somewhere greater than in the back of someone's garage. A Swiss deposit box would actually be a great place to put it, but fortunately that's too Muggle for You-Know-Who's taste."

"So you seriously have no plan?" Ron looked a little ill.

"I seriously have no plan," Harry agreed. "But hey, at least now that we all get that, we can start trying to figure out anyplace that's important to You-Know-Who and get this done that much faster."

Ron groaned. "If your epic adventures are always this much work, no wonder you never get anything done until June..."
"BLOOD!" Ron yelled. "HE'S GONE! AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?"

"N-no," Hermione denied, looking like she had a very good idea indeed.

Ron threw something down onto Hermione's rune translation. Hermione and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

"YOUR CAT ATE MY RAT!" Ron shouted.

Hermione jumped up. "No, Crookshanks wouldn't touch him!"

"THEN WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENED?" Ron demanded, still hollering.

"Ron, if you don't start using your 'indoor voice' then I'm going to hex you," Harry warned.

Ron turned and glared at his best friend but Harry simply raised his wand warningly. Looking incredibly put-out, Ron continued in a more reasonable and less headache-inducing voice, "Hermione, that cat has had it out for Scabbers since the beginning and now Scabbers is gone, there is blood on my sheets, and cat hair on my pillow. What other possible explanation can there be?"

"I don't know!" Hermione burst out. "But Crookshanks would never-"

"Um, Hermione?" Harry interrupted. "I hate to interrupt, but why are you so sure that Crookshanks didn't do this?"

"Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!" she said shrilly. "First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything's my fault, isn't it! Just leave me alone, Harry, I've got a lot of work to do!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You always have work to do. And I'm not siding with Ron, I'm asking a simple question. Ron says that he thinks Crookshanks ate Scabbers and between the blood and the cat hair, I can understand why he thinks that. Other than the fact you would feel horrible if your pet ate his, do you have any reason for feeling that this is not the case?"

"Crookshanks is innocent," Hermione insisted, sitting back down.

"Innocent?" Ron snorted. "That cat was born evil."

"Not really helping, Ron," Harry told him flatly.

"Sorry," Ron apologized. "By all means, let's hear just why I'm wrong even though all the evidence is on my side for once."

"What reason could Crookshanks possibly have for eating Scabbers?" Hermione demanded. "I'll admit that the blood makes it seem like Scabbers was probably eaten but there are plenty of cats in Hogwarts; why blame mine?"

"Well, there aren't as many cats that have regular access to Gryffindor Tower," Harry said neutrally. "And Crookshanks is the only one with ginger fur."

"That's just circumstantial evidence!" Hermione insisted. "Crookshanks could have been framed!
We don't even know that Scabbers is dead because Ron didn't find a body!"
"That's because he was eaten!" Ron cried.

"You…honestly think that someone tried to frame Crookshanks?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Why not?" Hermione sniffed, her nose in the air. "It could happen."

"It could," Harry agreed. "But who WOULD? I mean, it's a rat and – no offence Ron – not very
interesting."

"None taken," Ron replied easily. "All of my offence is currently being directed at the girl who
has the gall to suggest that Scabbers wasn't eaten."

"I can't see anyone stealing it," Harry continued as if Ron had not just attempted to provoke
Hermione yet again. What, did he want to see her cry or something? "But if they did they
probably wouldn't have faked Scabbers' death."

"Why not?" Hermione challenged. "This way no one will go looking for it."

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged. "But tell me, if Ron had gone up there to give Scabbers his rat
tonic and just found the rat missing instead of presumably eaten, how would he have reacted."

"I would have just figured he was somewhere else and not worry about it until sometime next
week," Ron responded promptly.

"Exactly. Faking Scabbers death might be more conclusive, but it also attracts more attention
seeing as how it's much more dramatic," Harry said sagely.

"And again…Scabbers was just a really old, un-extraordinary rat. Why would anyone WANT to
take him? Too cheap to buy their own? Know a freak show that could use a decade-old rat?"
Harry posed the question rhetorically.

"Hey!" Ron protested. "Scabbers is not a freak!"

"It's just a term, Ron," Hermione explained absently. "And I don't know why anyone would but
that doesn't necessarily mean that they wouldn't. Maybe it was just someone being cruel."

"You're thinking of the wrong House," Ron corrected. "Although snakes also eat rats…"

"And if it wasn't a person but another cat…I could see that because, as Ron said, snakes eat rats
and so do cats," Harry said.

"You see?" Hermione said, jumping up again. "It could have been a different cat!"

"Except…" Harry hesitated. "The ginger hairs would kind of indicate that it was a ginger-colored
cat and Crookshanks is the only ginger cat in all of Gryffindor, if not all of Hogwarts."

"I…I know it looks bad," Hermione admitted. "But Crookshanks had no reason to go after
Scabbers! None at all!"

"Hermione," Harry said patiently, "Crookshanks is a cat, right?"

Hermione stared at him. "Right," she agreed cautiously.

"And what was Scabbers?" Harry continued.
"A rat," Hermione. "Harry, where are you going with this?"

"What do cats do to rats?" Harry pressed.

"They…eat…them," Hermione admitted reluctantly.

"So is it really that impossible that your cat could have eaten Ron's rat?" Harry finished.

Hermione sat down and all the fight seemed to drain right out of her. "No," she confessed softly. "I suppose it isn't."

"You see!" This time it was Ron who jumped to his feet. "She admits it! I told you this would happen! Didn't I say this would happen?"

"Yeah, you did, Ron," Harry answered. "But that really doesn't matter right now."

"Doesn't matter?" Ron echoed. "Doesn't matter? How can it not matter? Hermione's cat ate Scabbers!"

"We did just come to that conclusion, yes," Harry agreed diplomatically.

"That cat has had it out for Scabbers since day one and she did nothing – nothing – to try and prevent it," Ron hissed, looking downright vindicated now that Hermione had admitted to the strong probability that her cat had eaten Scabbers.

"Ron, everyone lets their pets run wild," Harry pointed out. "Most people manage to keep them in the Gryffindor Tower, but I know Neville hasn't seen Trevor since sometime in early October."

"What's your point?" Ron asked blankly.

Harry sighed. "My point is that nobody EVER keeps a close enough eye on their pets."

"And just look what's result from that!" Ron said indignantly. "Just because no one else watches over their pets doesn't let Hermione off the hook for not keeping an eye on hers when she KNEW it was after Scabbers."

"No," Harry conceded, "but it doesn't let you off the hook either."

"Me?" Ron looked genuinely surprised. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," Harry said simply. "And that's the point."

"Okay, you've lost me," Ron admitted.

"You've been saying since…well, August, really, that you didn't like Crookshanks, right?" Harry prompted.

"Right," Ron said, nodding firmly. "Because he's been trying to eat Scabbers since the moment they met."

"And you've known about this for over four months now, right?" Harry pressed.

"Yeah," Ron scowled. "Poor, poor Scabbers. He did well to last this long."

"You're blaming Hermione for not keeping her pet away from yours but since your rat was the one in mortal peril, why on Earth didn't you take better care of it?" Harry demanded.
Ron colored. "I took great care of it!" he insisted hotly. "He was just getting on in years, you know. I never forgot to feed him, I let him sleep on my bed, I bought him rat tonic…he might have been on his way out the door anyway, but he deserved to enjoy his old age in peace! I mean, he bit Goyle that one time!"

"I remember, Ron," Harry assured him. "A true hero, I know. But if you knew that your pet was in danger and Hermione didn't seem inclined to do anything about her cat, then you should have taken precautions to keep Scabbers safe. Maybe got him a cage and enchanted it so a cat couldn't open it. You don't need to buy them like that, I'm sure you can do the spells yourself. And if you didn't know them, I'm sure Hermione would be happy to learn just so she wouldn't have to deal with your accusations about Crookshanks anymore."

"My totally legitimate accusations, as it turns out," Ron felt the need to point out.

"Yeah, that's even more reason to have looked into that," Harry countered. "And above all, let me just remind you both of one key fact. Crookshanks is a cat. Scabbers was a rat."

"We are well aware, Harry," Hermione spoke up.

"Cats eat rats; it's in their nature. I don't buy that Crookshanks was obsessing over Scabbers in particular – or else it wouldn't have taken so long – but Scabbers was the rat most readily available. While I'll concede Hermione should have been more careful, so should you have, Ron," Harry insisted. "And you really can't blame Hermione for the actions her cat took when all it did was behave like a cat."

Ron looked torn. "I…suppose not. But I will never, under any circumstances, EVER forgive that damn cat."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fair enough as long as you don't take it out on Hermione."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a funeral to plan," Ron announced.
You Can Be Your Own Secret-Keeper?

Chapter Notes

The idea for this chapter came from iheartmwpp and emodragon. Thanks for the inspiration.

Harry stood once he finished burying Dobby and went to go find Bill.

He was sitting in the living room with the others and Harry arrived in time to hear him say, "We're lucky Ginny's on holiday. If she'd been at Hogwarts they could have taken her before we reached her. Now we know she's safe too." He looked around and saw Harry standing there. "I've been getting them all out of the Burrow. Moved them to Muriel's. The Death Eaters know Ron's with you now, they're bound to target the family –don't apologize," he added at the sight of Harry's expression. "It was always a matter of time, Dad's been saying so for months. We're the biggest blood traitor family there is."

"How are they protected?" asked Harry anxiously.

"Fidelius Charm. Dad's Secret-Keeper. And we've done it on this cottage too; I'm Secret-Keeper here. None of us can go to work, but that's hardly the most important thing now-"

"Wait, what?" Harry interrupted. "You're the Secret-Keeper?"

"Yes, is that a problem?" Bill asked, mildly confused.

"I thought you couldn't be your own Secret-Keeper," Harry said slowly, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

"That would be 'ighly impractical," Fleur responded. "After all, oo better to entrust with ze safety of yourself and your family than yourself?"

"Does anyone hear know how to contact Remus?" Harry demanded. "Because I need to see him as soon as possible."

Bill nodded. "Yeah, I know how to reach him. I'll see if he can come."

Once he'd left, Hermione turned her attention to him. "What's going on? I thought you needed to see Griphook and Ollivander?"

"Oh, I do," Harry agreed. "And that's very important but I honestly don't think I can focus on any of that until I get this confrontation out of the way."

"Another confrontation, mate?" Ron asked skeptically. "Are you sure that's the best idea? You haven't even seen him since the last one."

"I don't know if it's the best idea, but since my parents, Sirius, Dumbledore, and now even Wormtail are dead, he really is the only one I can ask," Harry said firmly.

"Ask what?" Ron asked.
"Why nobody told me you can be your own Secret-Keeper!" Harry burst out.

"I don't think you ever talked about it with any of them, did you?" Hermione asked reasonably. "What's the big deal, anyway? We've really only used the Fidelius as far as Sirius's house went and if he had been the Secret-Keeper, the security would have been blown a full year before it did."

"Alright, he's here," Bill announced, showing a befuddled and slightly apprehensive Remus into the room.

"Harry," Remus said diplomatically.

"Remus, I, er, really should apologize for what I said before. It really wasn't appropriate and I just-" Harry stammered out, feeling it was best to get that out of the way quickly.

"Don't apologize, Harry," Remus cut in. "As setting someone straight goes, it may have lacked finesse and been a bit crueler than strictly necessary, but I needed to hear it. I'm sure your father and Sirius would have said the same."

"I'm glad we can put that behind us because I just got some very disturbing information," Harry informed the last of the Marauders.

Remus looked concerned. "What kind of information? Or can you not say?"

Harry shook his head. "Oh, no, I can. You already know this, I'm sure."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a bit more specific, Harry," Remus replied.

Harry took a deep breath. "You can be your own Secret-Keeper!" he declared dramatically.

"Well, not exactly," Remus corrected. "I mean, it's doable but not practical if you ever wanted to share the Secret. You could be the Secret-Keeper of your own residence, yes. Why is this so disturbing?"

"My parents were betrayed by their Secret-Keeper," Harry announced.

"We know, Harry," Ron and Hermione chorused.

"That was very unfortunate," Remus said, looking down. "And trust me, not a day goes by that I don't wish I had realized that they switched Secret-Keepers so Sirius wouldn't have had to languish away in Azkaban once he went after Wormtail seemingly unprovoked or possibly convinced them not to change their minds."

"Why did they need to use somebody else as a Secret-Keeper anyway?" Harry demanded.

"You-Know-Who was kind of after them," Ron answered helpfully. "Or you, really, but you shouldn't blame yourself; you were one."

"I'm not blaming myself," Harry insisted.

"This week," Hermione muttered.

"You think they should have gone with Dumbledore?" Remus asked. "His character was beyond reproach, but then, so was Sirius's. And we did have faith in Wormtail, even though hindsight has proven that foolish. Since his death would have meant we were all in a lot of trouble – as it does now – he really should have been chosen but Lily said something about how some old woman
they lived next to mentioned he used to be friends with Grindelwald…They didn't believe it, of course, but it reminded them that there was a lot they didn't know about Dumbledore and not much they didn't know about Sirius and so they wanted to put their faith in him and, in turn, his recommendation."

"I see," Harry said quietly. He had been wondering why they would put their best friend in danger by having him be the only way to find them when Dumbledore wouldn't have been in any more danger than he already was and he supposed that made about as much sense as anything. "But that wasn't what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Remus asked.

"Why did my parents have to have anyone from the outside serve as their Secret-Keeper when one of them could have very easily done it and since it was their lives – and mine – at stake there was no chance that they would ever give up that information?" Harry challenged.

"I-" Remus stopped. "That's actually a very good question, Harry."

"Did that even come up?" Harry wanted to know. "Because apparently both Bill and Mr. Weasley are serving as the Secret-Keepers on their places and no one is acting as if it is very odd. I would have thought from the fact that Dumbledore was Grimmauld Place's Secret-Keeper but was almost never there would indicate that the Secret-Keeper couldn't stay at the place being protected for too long or the charm would weaken but that clearly isn't the case since Bill seems to be living here and from what I can tell Mr. Weasley is with the rest of his family."

"I wasn't privy to all of the discussions that James and Lily, and Sirius, I guess, held about who should be the Secret-Keeper," Remus defended. "I'm not sure if they thought about it and dismissed it for some reason but since it really does seem to be the most secure method, I doubt that was the case. Since they died sixteen years ago, we have advanced as a society. Maybe people didn't realize it was possible then and thought as you did that you couldn't be your own Secret-Keeper."

"But you don't know," Harry said disdainfully, clearly under the impression that Remus should.

"The Fidelius Charm, for all that it seems to be standard issue these days, is a very complex and obscure piece of magic. I had no reason to have even heard of it before your parents decided to use it," Remus explained. "And when they said they needed a Secret-Keeper, it sounded like they would need an outside party to be that. Granted, I heard nothing that explicitly stated that they couldn't serve as their own Secret-Keepers but in their rush to cast the Charm and get hidden they were looking more for whom to entrust everything to and less in finding a loophole."

"But they should have!" Harry objected. "Then maybe they wouldn't have died and Sirius wouldn't have had his life destroyed and Wormtail wouldn't have been in any position to bring back Vol- You-Know-Who," he quickly amended, remembering that they had just gotten out of Malfoy Manor after he'd thoughtlessly triggered the Taboo and what escaping had cost them.

"Maybe he wouldn't have vanished, either," Hermione said gently. "And while outright taking over probably wouldn't have taken place with Dumbledore around, would you really want the last sixteen years to be just like our sixth year?"

"No," Harry admitted. "But surely in sixteen years SOMEONE could have hit him with an Avada Kedavra."

"It wouldn't have killed him," Ron pointed out.
"It was fairly effective as a means of making him go away for a decade and a half," Harry countered. "And who knows? If Dumbledore had more time, he might have been able to prevent You-Know-Who from coming back at all."

"Wouldn't Wormtail still be around to bring him back?" Ron wondered.

"If no one knew he was a traitor and he wasn't desperate, would he go back to You-Know-Who?" Harry shot back.

"Point," Ron conceded.

"I suppose that's another thing you can't tell me about?" Remus asked wryly.

"Kind of," Hermione said with a wince. "Sorry."

"Although considering that this is Dumbledore we're talking about and he didn't have to waste third year worrying about Sirius and fourth year Wormtail wasn't helping him, who knows what he could have accomplished," Ron said loyally.

"That's all well and good," Remus said, "but the fact of the matter is that Lily and James did not end up using themselves as a Secret-Keeper and they did tragically decide to go with Wormtail and he did decide to betray them. They weren't betrayed immediately, so I suppose they did mean something to him after all but in the end they are dead, you are alive, and we've got a war to fight."

"You're right," Harry sighed. "But I swear to God, next time I see any of these people, they have a lot to answer for."